

THE FACTS



WHAT IS HIV?

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HIV, or the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that weakens the immune system. It damages white blood cells called CD4 cells. These cells fight infection and disease. This damage makes it more difficult for the body to fight off other infections. HIV also uses CD4 cells to make more of itself to infect other CD4 cells. There is no cure for HIV but treatment is very effective and can keep you healthy.

HIV is not AIDS

HIV and AIDS are different. HIV is the virus that can lead to AIDS if it is not treated, weakening the immune system and leading to serious infections. This stage of untreated HIV infection is called Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS. In Australia, AIDS is rare because we have very effective treatment for HIV. AIDS can occur if someone is living with HIV for a long time before they are diagnosed or if they don't take treatment.

People living with HIV can live a long, healthy life

People living with HIV can live a long and healthy life if they take HIV treatment. Beginning treatment soon after being diagnosed with HIV improves your health over the long term.

You are not alone

In 2018:

- Worldwide, approximately 36.9 million people were living with HIV.
- In Australia, approximately 27,500 people were living with HIV.
- Of the people in Australia, 87% were male; 13% were female.
- In Australia, 95% of people on treatment were treated effectively.
- In Victoria, approximately 7,800 people were living with HIV.

HIV testing and the window period

The time between contracting HIV and it showing up in a test is called the window period. This can be up to 12 weeks but is less in the tests used in Australia. If you receive a negative result (that shows that you do not have HIV) during the window period you should take another test three months later to be sure.

STAGES OF HIV INFECTION

People living with HIV don't usually have symptoms straight away. It can take a number of years for a person living with HIV to develop symptoms.

If HIV is untreated people living with HIV go through the following stages:

Acute (Primary) Infection

Acute infection takes place between contracting HIV and developing the antibodies to fight it. Some people will have flu-like symptoms one to four weeks after contracting HIV. This is called a seroconversion illness. It will usually only last one to two weeks. Symptoms may include:

- fever
- night sweats
- sore muscles
- swollen lymph glands (under arms, groin and neck)
- sore throat
- a rash

Some people have no symptoms at all.

Most people do not know that they have contracted HIV during the acute phase. During this phase, the amount of HIV in the blood is very high, and the risk of HIV being passed on to other people is also very high.

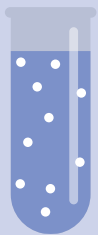
Chronic (Asymptomatic) HIV Infection

After seroconversion you may feel like you are back to normal health. For some people, this period may last over ten years. For other people it may be shorter. Even though you probably don't have serious symptoms, HIV is still active in your body, damaging your immune system and making copies of itself.

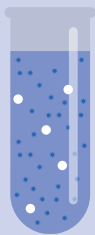
An AIDS Diagnosis

Over time, damage to the immune system caused by HIV increases the risk of serious illness. This can include cancers, heart disease, liver and kidney damage. Other effects can include weight loss, diarrhoea, fatigue, thrush, joint pain, skin problems and bacterial pneumonia. It can also affect the brain and memory.

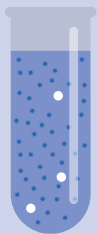
As the number of CD4 cells continues to drop too low and the amount of HIV in the blood rises, people begin to develop serious infections or cancers that are rare in people who do not have HIV. These are called AIDS defining illnesses. Even at this stage, starting HIV treatment is still effective and can lead to a return to good health.



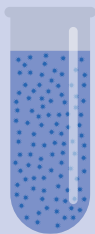
Before infection



Acute HIV infection



Chronic HIV infection



AIDS diagnosis

KEY

● CD4 cells

● HIV levels

WHAT IF I'M TAKING TREATMENT?

Treatment for HIV is very effective. If you take your treatment as prescribed by your doctor you will have a very low amount of HIV in your blood, you are unlikely to experience any symptoms, and you can live a long and healthy life.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

About HIV/AIDS

Information explaining HIV and AIDS

www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/whatishiv.html

AIDS and Opportunistic Infections

Up to date information about opportunistic infections and AIDS defining illnesses, including a list of infections

www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/livingwithhiv/opportunisticinfections.html

Next Steps

A guide for people newly diagnosed with HIV. It is available as a booklet from your HIV clinic or HIV community organisation or it can be downloaded from www.hivnextsteps.org.au



living positive victoria



Health
and Human
Services