

# HIV INFORMATION

## WHAT IS HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. A virus is a very small organism that can only grow by using the cells of the person it infects. HIV is a blood-borne virus, meaning it is spread through contact with infected blood (See *Factsheet 6: Blood-Borne Viruses* for more information). It can also be passed from person to person in body fluids including semen, breast milk and vaginal fluids. It **CANNOT** be passed through the air or through casual contact.

## WHAT IS AIDS?

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is defined as an advanced stage of HIV disease when the person is affected by specific medical conditions called opportunistic infections, or by some types of cancers. Even if a person has developed AIDS, with effective treatment, the immune system may recover and the person may remain well for many more years. Today in Australia, it is rare to see people with AIDS.

<b>HOW IS HIV SPREAD?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sexual activity, such as anal or vaginal sexual intercourse without condoms</li><li>• Sharing drug-injecting equipment such as needle sticks, barrels and syringes</li><li>• Needle stick injury</li><li>• From an HIV-positive mother to her baby, during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. HIV treatments can reduce and prevent these risks.</li></ul>
<b>HIV CANNOT BE TRANSMITTED BY:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social interaction such as shaking hands</li><li>• Touching, hugging, or kissing</li><li>• Sharing food, dishes, drinking glasses or cutlery</li><li>• Being coughed, sneezed, or cried on</li><li>• The air, or by breathing around a person with HIV</li><li>• Toilet seats, drinking fountains, swimming pools, communal gyms</li><li>• Animal or insect bites.</li></ul>

## WHO CAN GET HIV?

**Anyone** can contract HIV. In Australia HIV has tended to impact on key affected groups of people more, that doesn't mean other people **can't** contract HIV. Worldwide, more than half of all HIV cases are in heterosexual women. HIV is a virus, and like all viruses, can affect anyone who comes in contact with it.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HIV?

People with HIV look just like anyone else. More often than not, there are no symptoms of HIV until a person has had it for several years. Some people show flu-like symptoms when they first get HIV, but quickly get better. Without testing or treatment, symptoms appear after 3-10 years. These are called **opportunistic illnesses** (see *Factsheet 5: HIV Co-morbidities* for more information), and include things like pneumonias and viruses that an otherwise healthy immune system can fight off.

## PREVENTING HIV

HIV is easily prevented, especially in health and care settings. By using **standard precautions** (see *Factsheet 2: Prevention and Standard Precautions* for more information), carers and workers can prevent the spread of HIV and other infections. They are used whether or not a person has an infection, and whether or not you think they might. Standard precautions should be used in every case. This includes: wearing gloves if contact with blood or body fluids is likely; safe handling of sharps; proper cleaning of spills; safe disposal of waste; and effective hand washing.

In other settings HIV transmission can be prevented through a number of methods: using condoms during sexual intercourse; using clean needles and injection equipment if using drugs or injecting medicine; for HIV-positive people, taking medications regularly as prescribed; for HIV-negative people, accessing **post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)** if you have been exposed to HIV.

There is also **pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)** which is antiretroviral medicine taken by a person who doesn't have HIV. In Victoria, PrEP is currently available through a recently expanded research trial, but can also be imported from online medication providers, or at full cost from pharmacies that dispense HIV medication.

## ARE HEALTH CARE WORKERS AT RISK OF GETTING HIV?

Provided they practice standard precautions, there is almost no chance a health care worker will get HIV. The chances of HIV spreading in occupational and workplace settings is already very low. When workers use standard precautions the risk is all but eliminated.

## HOW CAN I GET TESTED FOR HIV?

HIV tests are widely available across Victoria. Most GPs can provide HIV tests upon request, and provide results after two weeks. In Melbourne, many places provide confidential HIV testing. The Melbourne Sexual Health Clinic, at 580 Swanston Street, Carlton, provides HIV tests on a walk-in, first-come-first-serve basis. Most regional centres offer HIV testing at specialised sexual health services. For up-to-date information on where to get tested, call Living Positive Victoria on 03 9863 8733.