

HIV/AIDS

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is HIV/AIDS?

The letters in AIDS stand for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. It is a very serious disease. You get AIDS from a virus called HIV, (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). This virus harms your immune system, which protects you against infections. Since people with AIDS do not have this protection, they can get many different infections and cancers.

How is HIV/AIDS spread?

You can get AIDS only if the HIV virus gets into your body. The virus can be carried into your body in semen, the fluid from the vagina, or blood. People can get the HIV infection when they have sex or when they share injection needles or syringes. An infected mother can pass HIV onto her baby.

Signs and Symptoms of HIV/AIDS

Early stages

Some people experience signs and symptoms of HIV as soon as they become infected, others do not. Signs and symptoms are often mistaken for flu or a mild viral infection. The person appears to recover, usually between one to four weeks later. Early signs and symptoms include;

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Enlarged lymph nodes (neck, armpits and groin)

Later stages

Signs and symptoms that may occur in later stages of HIV/AIDS are:

- rapid weight loss
- dry cough
- recurring fever or profuse night sweats
- profound and unexplained fatigue
- swollen lymph glands in the armpits, groin, or neck
- diarrhea that lasts for more than a week
- white spots or unusual blemishes on the tongue, in the mouth, or in the throat
- pneumonia
- red, brown, pink, or purplish blotches on or under the skin or inside the mouth, nose, or eyelids
- memory loss, depression, and other neurological disorders

HIV destroys white blood cells that are required to fight infection. As the white cell count falls to dangerous levels infections and diseases emerge. It is at this point that a person is said to have AIDS.

These signs and symptoms are similar to many different viral infections and diseases. The only way to know if you are infected with HIV is to be tested. Many people infected with HIV do not have any signs and symptoms for many years.

How can you tell if you have HIV infection?

There is a blood test for HIV. It is called the HIV antibody test.

If your HIV test result is positive, it means you are infected with HIV. If the test result is negative, it probably means you do not have HIV antibodies, but these can take three to six months to show up. So your test can be negative, and you can still have the virus if you have been infected recently. If there is a chance you have only recently been infected, the only way to be sure you do not have HIV is to have a second test six months after your first test.

AIDS is the last stage of the HIV infection. People who have AIDS may become very ill and die. But you can protect yourself against HIV and AIDS.

How can you protect yourself against HIV?

- Use a new condom every time you have sex, even oral sex.
- Do **not** have a lot of different sex partners.
- Do **not** share injection needles, syringes or other injection equipment.
- Do **not** share razors or toothbrushes.

Remember, if you take risks having sex, you can get infections, and you can pass on the infections to people who have sex with you and to their unborn babies. Protect yourself and others by having safe sex.

What should you do if you think you may have HIV or AIDS?

If you think you have symptoms, or if you took a risk having sex or using drugs, see your doctor, YCDC or community health centre. You may need to have a blood test. If your blood test is positive, it means you have been infected with HIV, and you could pass it onto others. It does not mean that you have AIDS or that you will get it.

What can be done?

There is no cure for HIV infection or AIDS. The virus stays in your body. Doctors are using different medicines for the infections and illnesses that people with HIV may get, but there is no cure yet.

Inform your partner(s)

Since HIV is a reportable disease in Yukon, it is important that your sex partner(s) and anyone you have shared needles with be notified if you have HIV. They will have to decide if they want to be tested for HIV infection.

You may want to tell them yourself. If you cannot tell them, then talk to the doctor, Yukon Communicable Disease Control (YCDC) or local community health nurse. They can help to notify partners in a confidential manner so you do not need to reveal your test results to others.

Contact Information

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

Adapted from BC HealthFiles