

# HIV/AIDS

HIV stands for “human immunodeficiency virus.” This is the virus that causes AIDS, or “acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.” In AIDS, the immune system doesn’t work normally to fight off disease-causing germs. With current treatments, people with HIV infection can lead relatively normal lives. Practicing safe sex reduces the chances of catching HIV. Pregnant women with HIV need treatment to keep from spreading the virus to their baby.

## What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV slowly destroys the body’s immune system. Not all patients with HIV infection have AIDS. AIDS occurs when the HIV infection has become severe. AIDS is a serious disease that reduces the body’s ability to fight off infections. Germs that cause mild or no illness in people with normal immune systems can be dangerous in people with AIDS, who are highly susceptible to them.

The global epidemic of HIV/AIDS is a major health problem. Millions of people around the world are infected with this currently incurable disease. For infants, the main risk is that HIV will be passed on from an infected mother, although effective treatments can reduce this risk. Teenagers may get HIV infection through unsafe sex or from being exposed to blood from an infected person.

In the United States and other developed countries, effective medications are available to control HIV and reduce the chances of AIDS. These treatments cannot eliminate HIV, but they can help infected people lead nearly normal lives. All patients with HIV infection need lifelong medical follow-up.

## What are the facts on HIV/AIDS?

- It’s estimated that about 1 million people in the United States were living with HIV infection by the end of 2003, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). About one fourth of these may not even know they have HIV.
- A person with HIV infection can look perfectly healthy. The virus may be present for 5 to 6 years before any symptoms develop.
- Infants and young children can catch HIV from an infected mother during pregnancy, birth, or breast feeding. Almost all children with HIV/AIDS are infected in this way. Fortunately, simple treatments can greatly reduce the risk of passing HIV on from mother to child. If you are pregnant, it’s a good idea to be tested to make sure you don’t have HIV.

- In the past, children and adults sometimes were infected with HIV through blood transfusions. However, with current testing procedures, this is now rare.
- Older children and teenagers may be infected with HIV by having sex with an infected person. Having several sexual partners and not using condoms when having sex are the main risk factors.
- Being exposed to blood from an infected person can also spread HIV. This most often occurs when drug users share needles used to inject drugs.
- HIV is *not* passed by more casual contact, such as sharing eating utensils or toilet seats.
- *Symptoms may not develop for months or even years after HIV infection is transmitted.* However, the virus is still present, and the infected person can still pass it on to others.

## What are some possible complications of HIV/AIDS?

- The main complication of HIV infection is AIDS. In AIDS, the body’s immune system has been damaged and can’t work effectively to fight off germs. This leads to dangerous infections and other health problems. For people with HIV infection, effective treatment can reduce the chances of developing AIDS.
- When children have HIV, the mother and others in the family may be infected too. This can make it difficult to provide a stable environment for the family. If needed, community resources may be able to help the family deal with the difficult challenges of living with HIV.

## What increases the risk of HIV/AIDS?

- Unsafe behaviors, especially having unprotected sex with many partners and using injectable drugs and sharing needles.
- Living in an area with a high rate of HIV/AIDS, including developing countries and certain U.S. cities.

## Can HIV/AIDS be prevented?

*If you are infected with HIV and are pregnant, it is very important that you get treatment to reduce the chances of passing the virus to your baby. Treatments such as azathioprine (AZT) can greatly reduce your baby’s chances of becoming infected with HIV.*

- Practice safe behaviors that reduce your chances of becoming infected with HIV or, if you are infected, of passing the virus to others:

- Do not use injectable drugs or share needles.
- Limit the number of sexual partners.
- If having sex, always use a condom (protected sex).

### How is HIV/AIDS treated?

- The treatment of HIV/AIDS can be very complicated and require the use of various kinds of medications. Usually an expert in HIV infections—typically a specialist in infectious diseases—will be involved in the care of your child. Treatment can't completely cure HIV infection, but it can help to keep the infection under control. Many

people whose HIV infection is not severe can live nearly normal lives with proper treatment.

- HIV/AIDS has a major impact on the lives of many families. Fortunately, with good medical care and community support, these families can lead healthy, active, and productive lives.



### When should I call your office?

Call our office or an HIV specialist if you have any questions about HIV/AIDS, including prevention, testing, and treatment.