



# HIV Basics

HIV Questions and Answers



## Do you know how to protect yourself from HIV and AIDS?

Learn what you can do to stay healthy and help stop the spread of HIV.

### What are HIV and AIDS?

- HIV is the virus that causes AIDS.
- AIDS is a late-stage disease that involves severe damage to the immune system.

### Does a person with HIV always have AIDS?

- No. People can live for years with HIV without getting AIDS, especially if they receive treatment.
- Sometimes people have HIV for years and do not show any signs or symptoms.

### Is there a cure?

- There is not a cure for HIV or AIDS, but there are many effective treatments for HIV infection.
- People with HIV can get free or low-cost medical care to help them live long and healthy lives.

### How is HIV spread?

- Through blood, semen, fluid from the vagina, and breast milk.
- Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom.
- Sharing needles and works when injecting drugs.
- Contact with blood from another person.
- Women with HIV can pass the virus to their children before or during birth or when they breastfeed.

### Can HIV be spread in other ways?

- You cannot get HIV from casual contact like a hug or a handshake or by sharing a glass with someone who has the virus.
- You cannot get HIV from someone coughing or sneezing.
- HIV can sometimes be spread through oral sex. But it is low risk.

### Is there a link between HIV and other diseases?

- Yes. Sex without a condom can also put you at risk for sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis, Chlamydia, herpes, and genital warts.
- People who have a sexually transmitted disease can get and pass HIV much more easily than people who don't.
- Contact with blood from another person can also spread hepatitis B or C.

### Am I at risk?

- Any time you have sex with a man or a woman or share needles you may be at risk for getting or passing HIV.
- Your risk goes up each time you take part in these behaviors.
- If your partner has sex or shares needles with other people, it increases your risk.

### How can I lower my HIV risk?

#### Here are three ways to reduce your risk:

- Use condoms *every time* you have sex.
- Have oral sex instead of anal or vaginal sex.
- Reduce your number of sex partners.

#### Here are some other things you can do:

- Know your own and your partner's HIV and STD status and level of risk. This can help you make smart choices about sex with your partner.
- If your partner has HIV, do what you can to help him or her get treatment and stay healthy.



Massachusetts Department  
of Public Health  
Office of HIV/AIDS  
[www.mass.gov/dph/aids](http://www.mass.gov/dph/aids)



## If you inject drugs, these steps might help cut your risk:

- Use a new sterile needle and syringe each time you inject drugs. You can get sterile needles at many pharmacies in Massachusetts or from needle exchange programs.
- Do not share needles, cotton, cookers, or other equipment.
- If you must share, share with as few people as possible and clean everything between uses. **Note:** cleaning with bleach lowers HIV risk but does not lower hepatitis C risk much.
- To clean needles and syringes before each use, first rinse them with water three times. Then fill them with bleach and shake for two minutes. Get rid of the bleach then repeat the whole process two times with new bleach. Finally, rinse with water three times.



## What should I know about HIV if I am pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant?

- Women with HIV can pass it to their children before or during birth or through breastfeeding.
- Learn your HIV status. If you are at risk for HIV, you may want to get tested more than once during your pregnancy.
- If you are HIV positive and pregnant, you can take certain medicines to reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby. Most babies born to women who have received treatment do not get HIV.
- Bottle-feed with formula instead of breastfeed so that you don't pass HIV to your baby.

## Why should I get tested?

- A test is the only way to know for sure if you have HIV.
- All test sites can point the way to medical care and support services to help you stay healthy.
- Since people sometimes pass on HIV even if they do not have any symptoms, knowing your HIV status can help you prevent passing HIV to your partner.

## Where can I go to get an HIV test?

- Your doctor or health care provider.
- One of the HIV testing programs across Massachusetts. These are listed at [www.mass.gov/dph/aids/resources](http://www.mass.gov/dph/aids/resources).



## What else should I know about HIV testing?

- No one can force you to take a test, and you must give consent before one is done.
- There are different kinds of tests. Your doctor or other health care provider can tell you more about which test(s) they use and when the results will be ready.
- You may be asked about the last time you had sex without a condom or shared a needle. This is because some tests can find HIV infection very soon after someone has been infected but other tests cannot.
- You may also be offered tests for hepatitis, syphilis, Chlamydia, and gonorrhea. This is because these infections are passed in the same ways as HIV.

