



Women and HIV

HIV Questions and Answers

Looking for the facts about HIV?

Learn what you can do to
make smart choices and
keep yourself healthy.

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.

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.
- There are special services for women and kids with HIV.

How is HIV spread?

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

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. Having 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.

Do birth control pills or spermicides stop the spread of HIV?

- NO. If you have sex, only a condom will reduce the risk of both pregnancy and HIV.
- Some spermicides can irritate your vagina, making it easier to get HIV during sex.

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.

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 equipment, 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.



As a woman, what should I know about HIV?

- Sex without a condom, sharing needles, and contact with other people's blood put you at risk for HIV infection.
- Many people do not know that they have HIV and some people don't want to talk about the risks they have taken. That is why the best way to protect yourself when you have sex is to choose to do things that will reduce your HIV risk.
- Having more than one partner increases the risk of passing or getting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- For some women, it is hard to ask their partner to wear a condom or to do other things to lower HIV risk if they don't always feel safe. There are people who can help. Call Jane Doe for more information at 617-248-0922.

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.
- Get regular medical care while pregnant and talk with your health care provider about HIV.
- 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 to prevent passing HIV to your baby.

What are female condoms?

- A female condom (FC) is used inside the vagina. Like condoms used by men, they prevent both pregnancy and the spread of disease.
- You can buy these at pharmacies. Some community groups may provide them for free.

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 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.



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 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.

What should I do if I have had condomless sex or shared a needle with someone who has HIV or likely has HIV?

- You can reduce your risk by taking certain medicines for one month after having sex without a condom or sharing a needle.
- These medicines have to be started less than 72 hours after your risk. The sooner you start taking these medicines, the better.
- Your nearest hospital emergency room or health care provider can help you decide if these medicines are right for you. If they are, the doctor can give them to you or tell you where to get them.
- If these medicines are not right for you, talk to the doctor about when to get an HIV test.

