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What You Need to Know About HIV and AIDS

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The first hint of the deadly infectious disease that would go on to ravage continents and lead to 658,000 deaths to date in this country came in the form of the June 5, 1981 CDC MMWR publication describing the occurrence of the rare lung infection Pneumocystis Pneumonia (PCP) in five young, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles.¹

By 1994, and until 1996, what became known as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), was the leading cause of death for all Americans between the ages of 25 and 44, and was declared a threat to national security by President Clinton in 2000.²

Today, thirty five years later, almost 1.2 million people in the U.S. are living with AIDS, which is the most severe phase of infection with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

HIV remains a serious health problem with around 50,000 new infections in this country each year since the mid 1990's. Sadly, it is estimated that 1 in 8 people infected with HIV are not aware that they are.

Concerning also is that, in a joint survey released by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Washington Post on July 1, 2012, it was noted that roughly one in four Americans did not know that HIV cannot be transmitted by sharing a drinking glass (almost the same percentage as in 1987).³ What truly worries me is the possibility that the generation that missed the emergence of HIV/AIDS now lacks sufficient information about the illness and may even be overly cavalier with regard to the consequences of infection, with the mistaken idea that, "If I get it, all I have to do is take a pill."

Across the nation African Americans; Latinos; and gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM), of all races and ethnicities, are disproportionately affected by HIV. Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent 63% of all new infections.

In [Fresno County](#) in 2014 there were 94 new cases of HIV/AIDS reported. Of these 55% were Hispanic, 21% Caucasian, and 14 % African American. Seventy-five percent of these new cases resulted from men

having sex with men (MSM). IV drug use (alone or in combination with other risk factors) resulted in another 5.4% of these new cases, and heterosexual sex another 6.3%.

There were also 1076 individuals living with AIDS in the county in 2014 and an additional 701 known to be infected with HIV. Of these 1777 individuals, only 1327 appeared to be receiving appropriate care, only 920 were taking appropriate medications, and only 314 had indications of good control of their illness.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus weakens an individual's immune system by destroying important cells (specifically CD4 cells) that fight other serious infectious diseases and malignancies. There remains no cure for HIV infection and no effective vaccine, but with proper medical care the infection can be controlled. Individuals diagnosed with HIV and treated before the disease is far advanced have a nearly normal life expectancy.

HIV is transmitted by only certain body fluids (blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk) from individuals with HIV when they come in contact with another individual's mucous membranes, damaged skin, or by direct injection into the blood stream. HIV can also be transmitted from a mother to her unborn infant.

Within 2 to 4 weeks of exposure, an individual will experience acute HIV infection with flu-like symptoms, or possibly no symptoms. At this time individuals will have large amounts of the virus in their blood. This is followed by a period known as asymptomatic HIV infection or chronic HIV infection. During this phase the virus reproduces at low levels and individuals have no symptoms or unusual illness. This phase can last an average of ten years (but some may progress through this stage faster) before progressing to AIDS, where the critical CD4 cell count drops below 200 cells/mm and certain opportunistic illnesses develop. Without treatment individuals with AIDS survive about three years. Once you have a dangerous opportunistic illness, life expectancy without treatment is about one year.

Proper treatment of HIV/AIDS requires diagnosis at the earliest stage possible, the beginning of antiretroviral treatment (ART) as soon as possible after diagnosis, and on-going compliance with medication.

Receiving a diagnosis of HIV can be a life changing event. If you are living with HIV it is important to make choices that keep you healthy and that protect others. These include:

- Starting HIV treatment as soon as you are diagnosed with HIV.
- Disclosing your HIV status to your sex and needle-sharing partners.
- Finding a local support group and learning how others living with HIV have handled their diagnosis.
- Reducing the risk to others by consistently taking your HIV medication, staying in care, testing for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and reducing high risk sexual and needle-sharing behaviors.

For individuals without known HIV infection several steps can be taken to reduce your risk of infection:

- Know your HIV status. [CDC recommendations](#): Everyone between the age of 13 and 64 should be tested for HIV at least once, and individuals engaging in high risk behaviors should be tested regularly. ([Find Testing Locations](#))
- Reduce high risk sexual and [needle use](#) behaviors.

- Always use [condoms](#) if not in a mutually monogamous relationship.
- Be sure your sexual partner, if HIV positive, is being adequately treated to lower his/her viral load.
- Take advantage of pre-exposure prophylaxis ([PrEP](#)) if you are at very high risk for HIV from sexual activity or injecting drugs.
- Start post-exposure prophylaxis ([PEP](#)) within 72 hours after a possible exposure (if not taking PrEP) and continue it for 28 days.
- Seek treatment for any suspected or known sexually transmitted disease (STD).

Here's to your health!



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Citations:

- 1) http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm
- 2) <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/>
- 3) <http://kff.org/hiv/aids/poll-finding/2012-survey-of-americans-on-hiv/aids/>
- 4) <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/just-diagnosed-with-hiv-aids/hiv-in-your-body/stages-of-hiv/>