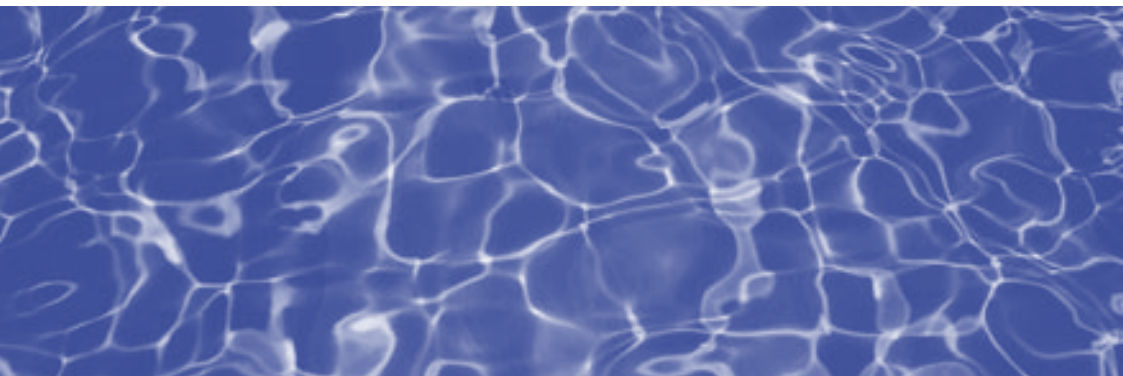


HIV/AIDS: Your questions answered



HIV/AIDS

What is HIV?

HIV means human immunodeficiency virus.

It is a virus that weakens the immune system in humans. It is found in the blood (including menstrual blood), semen (cum), and vaginal fluid of a person who has HIV.

What is AIDS?

AIDS means Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Acquired means not inherited.

Immune Deficiency means a breakdown in the body's immune system.

Syndrome refers to a range of diseases that may be associated with another disease. In this case, diseases that take advantage of the body's weakened immune system are used to define the onset of AIDS.

How is AIDS different from HIV?

HIV causes AIDS.

Someone who has HIV (a virus) may not have AIDS (an illness). HIV weakens the body's immune system, leaving it open to various infections and cancers.

For most people who have HIV, the progression to AIDS is fairly slow, taking years from HIV infection to the development of AIDS. Without treatment people who have HIV eventually become ill and can develop AIDS within five to ten years. However there are a small percentage of people who do not show any deterioration in their health, even after ten years.

How is HIV transmitted?

Although you can get HIV from a single contact, the more frequently a person has contact with fluids containing the virus, the higher the chances of infection. Risk activities include:

- **Unprotected (without a condom) anal sex.** Men who have sex with men are presently at the greatest risk of HIV infection.
- **Unprotected vaginal or anal sex between men and women.**

While HIV infection among heterosexuals who do not use drugs is still low in Victoria, people are at an increased risk if their partners include:

- men who have sex with men;
- current or former injecting drug users; or
- people who have come from countries where there are large numbers of people who have HIV.

- **Sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment during injecting drug use.**

The virus spreads very easily through shared needles, and even casual or one-time users may get HIV. It makes no difference which drug is being injected.

- **Unprotected sex or sharing injecting drug use equipment in regions where there are higher rates of HIV infection.** Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most affected region in the world. Growing epidemics are underway in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, in 2006 the vast majority of the 39.5 million people living with HIV across the globe were unaware of their status.
- **Having had a blood transfusion or receiving other blood products in countries that do not screen for HIV.**

HIV can also be spread:

- from a mother who has HIV to a child during pregnancy, birth, or via breastfeeding;
- by unprotected oral sex with someone who has HIV, however this is much less common; or
- by exposure to HIV positive blood, e.g., through a needlestick or sharps injury in a health care setting.

In Australia, HIV is most commonly spread by sexual intercourse without a condom and through sharing of needles, syringes and other injecting equipment.

How is HIV not transmitted?

HIV does not live long outside of the body. It can be killed by ordinary household bleach, or soap and warm water. Therefore, HIV cannot be spread through ordinary social or family contact such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing household items, toilet seats, swimming pools or pets.

What is the risk of catching HIV from having a blood transfusion?

Since May 1985, all blood donations in Australia have been tested for HIV. This means that blood transfusions in this country are now an extremely low risk for HIV.

Can I get HIV when donating blood?

No. In Australia needles, packs, swabs, finger-pricking lancets and so on are sterile and never re-used.

I think I might have been exposed to HIV – is there anything I can do?

There is a treatment called post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for HIV. PEP is a month-long course of drugs that may prevent a person from becoming infected with HIV if they begin treatment within three days of exposure to HIV.

If you may have been exposed, contact a health service as soon as possible for treatment. See the 'Further Information' section at the end of this booklet for service details for PEP.

What is safe sex?

Safe sex is sex where semen, vaginal secretions or blood are not exchanged between sexual partners.

Using condoms properly during intercourse (anal or vaginal) will greatly reduce the risk of spreading HIV. Condoms must be used correctly and with plenty of lubricant. Water based lubricant should be used as other types of lubricants (like oil or Vaseline) will cause condoms to break. Female condoms are also available and should be used with lubricants. Safe sexual activities include mutual masturbation, touching, cuddling, body-to-body rubbing, and erotic massage.

Safe sex is recommended if either partner has HIV or if either partner is unsure of whether they have HIV. Other sexually transmissible infections (STIs), e.g. herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis can also be spread by unprotected sex. If either partner has an STI or if either partner is unsure of whether they have an STI, safe sex is also recommended.

Unprotected oral sex is low risk for spreading HIV but using a condom is recommended.

It is advisable to use a condom, or avoid ejaculation into the mouth, when:

- either partner has ulcers or bleeding gums; or
- has just brushed or flossed their teeth.

Also, condom use may prevent the spread of other STIs, which may be spread more easily by unprotected oral sex.

What are the symptoms of HIV?

Symptoms of HIV are common to a number of illnesses. Some of the more common symptoms of HIV-related illnesses are:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Extreme and constant tiredness
- Fevers, chills and night sweats
- Rapid weight loss for no known reason
- Swollen lymph glands in the neck, underarm or groin area
- White spots or unusual marks in the mouth
- Skin marks or bumps (raised or flat, usually painless and purplish)
- Continuous coughing or a dry cough
- Diarrhoea
- Decreased appetite.

Someone who has HIV may not have any symptoms, but they carry the virus and could pass it on through blood or body fluids (e.g. unprotected sexual intercourse).

Some of these symptoms may also indicate that HIV has developed into AIDS.

If you think you have been put at risk of HIV or if you have any of the symptoms above (or any combination of them) for a month or longer, you should consult your doctor.

Getting tested for HIV

Can I get tested for HIV?

Yes. A blood test can detect HIV infection.

If HIV infection is found in a person's blood then this person is said to be HIV positive. There is a short period just after a person is infected with HIV when the virus cannot be detected. People exposed to HIV may require a follow-up test three months later.

All people who request an HIV test must receive a pre-and post-test counselling (see page 9 for more details of this counselling).

Why be tested for HIV?

Deciding whether or not to be tested is up to each person, and testing should not happen without informed consent. This means that a person must have enough information and adequate counselling to make a decision about getting a test. If people find out they have HIV (called being 'HIV positive') they can take steps to reduce its impact on their health and prevent harm to themselves and other people. Research shows that early knowledge of HIV infection allows people to make important changes to their lives, which may significantly delay the onset of AIDS. Waiting until you get sick is not good for your health and may reduce treatment options.

People who think they have been put at risk of getting the virus should be tested for HIV.

What does the HIV test look for?

Having an HIV test tells you whether or not you are infected with HIV. The human body produces antibodies to fight the virus and the initial screening test for HIV looks for antibodies to the virus not the virus itself. The test is called an HIV antibody test. The blood must be sent to a laboratory for testing.

How is a test performed?

The HIV antibody test is a simple blood test performed on a small sample of your blood. The sample can be taken by your doctor, or in a community clinic or health centre. The law protects the confidentiality of your test.

Test results are usually available within seven days. If the test detects no HIV antibodies, the person is said to be HIV negative (sometimes the term antibody-negative is used). However the body sometimes takes up to three months to produce antibodies after infection occurs, so a repeat test may be necessary, depending on how recently the possible exposure to HIV took place.

If the test does detect the antibodies, the person is said to be HIV positive (or antibody-positive).

What does pre-and post-test counselling at the time of HIV testing involve?

- In Victoria, people who request an HIV test must by law receive pre-and post-test counselling. This can only be given by a doctor, or a person who has successfully completed an approved training course.
- Testing should be voluntary and only carried out with informed consent.
- Information should be provided about what is involved in the test.
- Information and counselling should take place about what it means to get tested.
- A test result should only be given to people face-to-face during post-test counselling.

For those who are infected, testing and counselling is an opportunity to do a number of things to protect their health. They can:

- Have further tests to find out how far their HIV infection has progressed.
- Begin treatments that can slow the progress of HIV infection and reduce the chances of developing AIDS.
- Make lifestyle changes (diet, exercise, stress, smoking, drug use) that improve their chances of staying well.
- Make informed decisions about relationships, pregnancy, career etc.
- Ensure they do not put others at risk of HIV infection.

For those who are not infected, pre-and post-HIV test counselling is very important to help people make changes to their sexual or drug-use practices to make sure they stay uninfected.

Some considerations when testing

Many people who are tested and discover they are HIV positive experience shock, anger, distress and depression. Pre-and post-test counselling should always happen at the time of an HIV test.

Many people fear they will experience prejudice or discrimination if it becomes known that they are HIV positive, or even that they have been tested for HIV. People who are HIV positive, or being tested for HIV should be very careful how and when they tell other people about their test result.

Like some other infectious diseases, positive test results must be sent to the Department of Human Services. This is so that trends in HIV infection can be followed, so as to see if prevention efforts are working. This information is coded so that individuals cannot be identified and all information is protected by Federal and State privacy laws. Victorian law makes it illegal to discriminate against people who are known or alleged to be HIV positive. Test results must be kept confidential.

If you would like to further discuss testing issues you can contact one of the agencies listed at the end of this brochure. They can refer you to doctors who specialise in HIV/AIDS and who will understand your concerns.

What is the cost of testing?

From 1 November 2005, diagnostic testing for HIV became available on the Medical Benefits Schedule. This means that your doctor can order this test free of charge.

Free anonymous testing is also available from the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (see 'Further Information' section at the end of this booklet).

Can HIV/AIDS be cured or treated?

Currently, there is no vaccine or cure for HIV/AIDS. However, there are drug treatments available that work against HIV.

For the majority of people, these drugs can postpone, and possibly prevent, HIV-related illnesses and delay moving on to AIDS. These drugs are not easy to take because of the side effects and difficult courses of treatment. It should be noted that once someone begins drug treatments for HIV, they should continue to take them for life.

There are also treatments for many of the specific illnesses associated with HIV and AIDS.

Complementary therapies are also used by people who have HIV to manage the side effects of drug treatment and improve general health and wellbeing.

New drugs and therapies are being trialled all the time.

What is the government doing about HIV/AIDS?

The Australian Government, state and territory governments work with community-based organisations, medical professionals and research organisations to reduce the spread of HIV and reduce the personal and social impacts of HIV/AIDS.

The Victorian Government's policy document on HIV/AIDS is the *Victorian HIV/AIDS Strategy 2002–2004 and Addendum 2005–2009*. This and other departmental documents can be downloaded from the Department of Human Services web site at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas>

A whole range of health information including information about HIV/AIDS can be found at the department's web site at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Further information

State-wide services

HIV/Sexual Health Connect

Information, referral and support line

Telephone: 1800 038 125

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

580 Swanston Street Carlton 3053

Telephone: (03) 9347 0244

TTY for deaf callers: (03) 9347 8619

Enquires from rural Victoria: Freecall 1800 032 017

Website: www.mshc.org.au

All services at the Centre are completely free and confidential.

Staff can give you up-to-date advice on the phone, make an appointment to see you, or give you a referral to doctors in your area who are able to help you.

Victoria AIDS Council/Gay Men's Health Centre

6 Claremont Street South Yarra 3141

Telephone: (03) 9865 6700

Freecall: 1800 134 840

Email: enquiries@vic aids.asn.au

Website: www.vic aids.asn.au

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

For more information about PEP free call 1800 889 887 or see the Victorian AIDS Council's PEP website at <http://www.getpep.info>

Education and Resource Centre at The Alfred

Fairfield House
Moubray Street Prahran 3181
Telephone: (03) 9076 6993
Email: erc@alfred.org.au
Website: www.hivhepsti.info

Victorian Infectious Diseases Service

Royal Melbourne Hospital
Grattan Street Parkville 3052
Telephone: (03) 9342 7000

Infectious Diseases Outpatient Clinic at The Alfred Hospital

Commercial Road Prahran, 3181
Telephone: (03) 9076 6081
Gay Men's Health: The Centre Clinic (St Kilda)
Rear 77 Fitzroy Street St Kilda 3182
Telephone: (03) 9525 5866

Also located at:

The Centre Clinic C/-Darebin Community Health Centre

42 Separation Street Northcote 3070
Telephone: (03) 9481 7155

Family Planning Victoria

901 Whitehorse Road Box Hill 3128
Clinic and Education Telephone:
(03) 9257 0100
Email: fpv@fpv.org.au

Action Centre (for Youth)

Level 1

92–94 Elizabeth Street Melbourne 3000

Clinic and Education Telephone: (03) 9654 4766

Freecall: 1800 013 952

Frankston Hospital

Sexual Health Clinic Outpatients Service

Hastings Road Frankston 3199

Telephone: (03) 9784 7650

Rural clinics

Sexual Health Clinic Ballarat

Community Health Centre

710 Sturt Street Ballarat 3350

Telephone: (03) 5338 4500

STD Clinic – Community Health Bendigo

Seymoure Street Eaglehawk 3556

Telephone: (03) 5434 4330

Website: www.bchs.com.au

Geelong Sexual Health Clinic

Clinic 4, Outpatients Department

Bellarine Centre Bellarine Street Geelong

3220

Open Tuesdays 2–7pm

Telephone: (03) 5226 7802

Vermont Street Health Clinic

Wodonga Regional Health Service

79 Vermont Street Wodonga 3690

Telephone: (02) 6051 7535

Latrobe Regional Hospital – Consulting Suites 3 and 4

Cnr Princes Highway & Village Way

Traralgon 3844

Telephone: (03) 5173 8111

Open Tuesdays 5.30–7.30pm

For further copies of this pamphlet, please go to www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas
or call the Communicable Disease Control Unit on **1300 651 160**.

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