

Human immunodeficiency virus, or [HIV](#), is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome ([AIDS](#)). The virus weakens a person's ability to fight infections and [cancer](#). People with HIV are said to have AIDS when they develop certain infections or cancers or when their CD4 (T-cell) count is less than 200. CD4 count is determined by a [blood](#) test in a doctor's office.

Having HIV does not always mean that you have AIDS. It can take many years for people with the virus to develop AIDS. HIV and AIDS cannot be cured. However with the medications available today, it is possible to have a normal lifespan with little or minimal interruption in quality of life. There are ways to help people stay healthy and live longer.

Cause

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The infection is caused by the [human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\)](#).

After [HIV](#) is in the body, it attacks and destroys [CD4+ cells](#), which are the part of the body's [immune system](#) that fights infection and disease. When HIV weakens or destroys the immune cells, it may lead to certain [illnesses or diseases](#), such as some types of [pneumonia](#) or [cancer](#) that are more likely to develop in someone who has a [weakened immune system](#). These conditions are a sign that HIV has progressed to [AIDS](#).

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[AIDS \(Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome\)](#)

Important It is possible that the main title of the report AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is not the name you expected. Please check the synonyms listing to find the alternate name(s) and disorder subdivision(s) covered by this report.

[Read the AIDS \(Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome\) article > >](#)

HIV is spread when [blood](#), [semen](#), or vaginal fluids from an infected person enter another person's body, usually through sexual contact, from sharing needles when injecting [drugs](#), or from mother to baby during birth.

HIV is rarely spread by blood transfusions or [organ transplants](#) in the United States because of improved screening procedures

How Does HIV and AIDS Cause Illness?

HIV attacks and destroys a type of white blood cell called a CD4 cell, commonly called the T-cell. This cell's main function is to fight disease. When a person's CD4 cell count gets low, they are more susceptible to illnesses.

What Is AIDS?

AIDS is the more advanced stage of HIV infection. When the immune system CD4 cells drop to a very low level, a person's ability to fight infection is lost. In addition, there are several conditions that occur in people with HIV infection with this degree of immune system failure -- these are called AIDS-defining illnesses.

According to the CDC, 1,051,875 people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with AIDS since the disease was first diagnosed in 1981. They also estimate that 583,298 have died from the disease in the U.S.

How Do People Get HIV?

A person gets HIV when an infected person's body fluids (blood, semen, fluids from the [vagina](#) or breast milk) enter his or her bloodstream. The virus can enter the blood through linings in the mouth, anus, or sex organs (the [penis](#) and vagina), or through broken [skin](#).

Both men and women can spread HIV. A person with HIV can feel OK and still give the virus to others. [Pregnant](#) women with HIV also can give the virus to their babies.

Common ways people get HIV:

- Sharing a needle to take [drugs](#).
- Having unprotected sex with an infected person.

You cannot get HIV from:

- Touching or hugging someone who has HIV/AIDS.
- Public bathrooms or swimming pools.
- Sharing cups, utensils, or telephones with someone who has HIV/AIDS.
- [Bug bites](#).

Who Can Get HIV?

Anyone can get HIV if they engage in certain activities. You may have a higher risk of getting HIV if you:

Have unprotected sex. This means vaginal or anal intercourse without a condom or oral sex without a latex barrier with a person infected with HIV.

Share needles to inject drugs or steroids with an infected person. The disease can also be transmitted by dirty needles used to make a tattoo or in body piercing.

Receive a blood transfusion from an infected person. This is very unlikely in the U.S. and Western Europe, where all blood is tested for HIV infection.

Are born to a mother with HIV infection. A baby can also get HIV from the breast milk of an infected woman.

If you fall into any of the categories above, you should consider being tested for HIV.

Health care workers are at risk on the job and should take special precautions. Some health care workers have become infected after being stuck with needles containing HIV-infected blood or less frequently, after infected blood comes into contact with an open cut or through splashes into the worker's eyes or inside their nose.

HIV and AIDS in African-Americans

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In many ways, African-Americans are bearing the brunt of the [HIV](#) crisis in the United States. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). African-Americans receive more AIDS diagnoses and experience more HIV-related deaths than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Here is a brief overview of the impact, possible causes, and potential ways to reduce the risk of HIV and AIDS in blacks.

The Impact of HIV in Blacks

Statistics only begin to show the tremendous toll HIV in blacks is taking.

- **More HIV infections.** African Americans make up 14% of the U.S. population, but they represent 44% of new HIV cases. The picture is even bleaker in black women, teens, and children. In 2009, the CDC estimates that the rate of new HIV infections in African American women was 15 times as high as the rate for white women.
- **Shorter survival.** On average, the survival time for African-Americans with AIDS is lower than for other racial or ethnic groups.
- **Increased numbers of deaths.** AIDS is a leading cause of death in African-Americans, especially in young women.

How HIV in Blacks Spreads

HIV in black men is spread most often through (in this order):

- Not using a [condom](#) or other protection when having sex with a man who is infected with HIV.
- Sharing injection drug needles or syringes with someone who is infected with HIV

- Not using a condom or other protection when having sex with a woman who is infected with HIV.

HIV in black women is spread most often through (in this order):

- Not using a condom or other protection when having sex with a man who is infected with HIV.
- Sharing injection drug needles or syringes with someone who is infected with HIV.

Why Are There so Many Blacks With HIV?

There are many ideas about why HIV in blacks is such a big problem. Factors like these are contributing to this growing epidemic:

- **Poverty.** African-Americans are more likely to be uninsured or publicly insured than whites. This can limit access to information, testing, and treatment for HIV and other diseases, and lead to higher rates of hospitalization. Financial challenges can also create dependence on [drugs](#). This may also lead to behaviors such as an exchange of sex for drugs, which increase the risk for HIV infection. In addition, women who are financially dependent may fall prey to power imbalances that can weaken their ability to protect themselves in [sexual relationships](#).
- **Injecting drug use.** This increases the spread of HIV through [blood](#), as well as leading to more risky sexual behavior.
- **Sexually transmitted diseases.** In 2004, African-Americans were 19 times more likely than whites to have [gonorrhea](#), one of many sexually transmitted diseases ([STDs](#)). Having STDs increases the chances of also getting HIV.
- **Lack of information.** Many may be HIV positive and not know it, so they continue to spread the disease. In addition, distrust in governmental sources of information and research lingers due to the historic Tuskegee [Syphilis](#) Study, which exploited blacks without their knowledge.

Stigma about HIV in blacks. Some people in the African-American community still mistakenly believe that HIV is a white, gay disease. This view may make it difficult to learn about or discuss their HIV status with others. Stigma may also silence men who have sex with men but don't tell their women sex partners. This is often called being on the "down low." Current studies may reveal just how much this practice contributes to the spread of HIV in blacks. These are a few of the ways to reduce the risk of HIV in blacks:

- Learn about safer sex. Use a latex condom and water -based lubricant each and *every* time you have sex.
- Learn what you can about your sex partners' past sex and drug use. Before you have sex, ask yourself -- is it worth the risk?
- Contact a local HIV/AIDS organization for tips on communicating with sex partners about HIV and [safe sex](#).
- Get information about the HIV drug Truvada. It has been approved for use in those at high risk as a way to prevent HIV infection and can be used in conjunction with safe sex practices.
- If you think you may have an STD, get treatment. This will help lower your risk for HIV.
- Think about getting tested during each of your regular medical check-ups. Don't let fear of discovery stop you from getting tested. You may need to ask your doctor specifically for an [HIV test](#).
- Do whatever you can to avoid sex when you drink alcohol or take drugs.
- If you inject drugs, always use clean needles and syringes; don't share them with others. Be sure to get tested at least once a year. Remember that counseling or treatment can help you stop using drugs.

HIV Tests

The only way to know if you have HIV is to take an HIV test. Most tests look for signs of HIV in your blood. A small sample of blood is taken from your arm. The blood is sent to a lab and tested for HIV.

Clinics that do HIV tests keep your test results secret. Some clinics even perform HIV tests without ever taking your name (anonymous testing). You must go back to the clinic to get your results. A positive test means that you have HIV. A negative test means that no signs of HIV were found in your blood.

Before taking an HIV test:

Ask the clinic what privacy rules it follows.

Think about how knowing you have HIV would change your life.

Ask your doctor or nurse any questions you have about HIV, AIDS, or the HIV test.

Home HIV test kits are sold online or at your local drugstore. The FDA has approved the Home Access HIV-1 Test System. To use this home test, prick a finger with a special needle and put a few drops of blood on a collection card. Then you mail the card to a lab. In about a week, you call a toll-free number to get the results. The whole process is anonymous because you use just the personal identification number in your kit when calling in for results.

The OraQuick In-Home HIV Test is also approved by the FDA. This test can detect antibodies of the virus from a saliva sample. It can provide results without a laboratory in 20 minutes. A positive result doesn't mean a definite infection with HIV, but rather that additional testing should be done in a medical setting. Also, a negative result doesn't mean that you are definitely not infected with HIV, particularly when exposure may have been within the previous three months.

HIV and AIDS

Who Should Be Tested for HIV?

Recently, the CDC changed testing recommendations. All adults should be screened at least once. People who are considered high risk (needle drug users, multiple sex partners, for example) should be tested more often. All pregnant women should be tested. Anyone who has sustained a needle stick or significant blood exposure from a person known to have HIV or from an unknown source should be tested, too.

Does HIV Have Symptoms?

Some people get flu-like symptoms within a month after they have been infected. These symptoms often go away within a week to a month. A person can have HIV for many years before feeling ill.

As the disease progresses, both women and men may experience yeast infections on the tongue (thrush), and women may develop severe vaginal yeast infections or pelvic inflammatory disease. Shingles is often seen early on, often before someone is diagnosed with HIV.

What Are the Symptoms of AIDS?

Signs that HIV is turning into AIDS include:

- A [fever](#) that won't go away
- Sweating while you [sleep](#)
- Feeling tired all the time (not from [stress](#) or lack of sleep)
- Feeling sick all the time
- [Losing weight](#)
- [Swollen glands](#) (neck, groin, or underarms)
- Oral thrush

What Infections Do People With AIDS Get?

People with AIDS are extremely vulnerable to infection, called AIDS-defining illnesses, and often exhibit the following conditions:

- Kaposi's sarcoma, a skin tumor that looks like dark or purple blotches on the skin or in the mouth
- Mental changes and [headaches](#) caused by fungal infections or tumors in the [brain](#) and spinal cord
- Shortness of breath and difficulty breathing because of infections of the [lungs](#)
- [Dementia](#)
- Severe malnutrition
- Chronic [diarrhea](#)

How Is AIDS Diagnosed?

If a person with HIV infection has a CD4 count that drops below 200 -- or if certain infections appear (AIDS-defining illnesses) -- that person is considered to have AIDS.

How Is HIV Treated?

We've come a long way from the days when diagnosis with HIV equaled a death sentence. Today, there are a variety of treatments that, when used in combination can significantly slow down and in some cases stop altogether, the progression of HIV infection.

After HIV infection is confirmed, your doctor will start you on a drug regimen consisting of several drugs; combinations of different types of anti-HIV drugs sometimes are called HAART, for highly-[active](#) [antiretroviral](#) therapy (HIV is a kind of virus called a retrovirus).

Taking HAART therapy is very manageable yet isn't necessarily easy. These drugs must be taken at the right time, every single day. Also, a range of side effects may occur, including: diarrhea, [nausea](#), rash, vivid dreams, or abnormal distribution of body fat. And, especially if medications are taken incorrectly or inconsistently, the virus can mutate, or change, into a strain resistant to treatment. The good news is that there are now several HIV medications that are only taken once a day. If there is resistant virus, however, these may not work and other medication options must be used.

If your disease has progressed to AIDS, your treatment may also include drugs to combat and prevent certain infections.

How Do I Know If the HIV Treatments Are Working?

Your doctor can monitor how well you're [HIV treatment](#) is working by measuring the amount of HIV in your blood (also called the viral load.) The goal of treatment is to get the viral load undetectable on labs tests; ideally less than 20 copies. This does not mean the virus is gone or cured, it means the medication is working and must be continued.

How Can I Keep From Getting HIV?

The best way to protect yourself from HIV is to avoid activities that put you at risk. There's no way to tell by looking at someone if he or she has HIV. Always protect yourself.

- Use latex [condoms](#) (rubbers) whenever you have any type of sex (vaginal, anal, or oral).
- Don't use condoms made from animal products.
- Use water-based lubricants. Oil-based lubricants can weaken condoms.
- Never share needles to take drugs.
- Avoid getting drunk or high. People who are drunk or high may be less likely to protect themselves.

How Can I Prevent HIV From Progressing to AIDS?

You can help prolong your life by taking good care of yourself and developing a good relationship with an experienced doctor specializing in HIV and AIDS. Also, be consistent about taking your HIV medications as prescribed and getting regular lab work to catch any problems early.

What Is the Outlook for Someone With HIV or AIDS?

It depends on if that person is on treatment and how the virus responds to early treatment. When treatment fails to decrease the replication of the virus, the effects can become life threatening, and the infection can progress to AIDS.

Even with treatment, some people seem to naturally experience a more rapid course towards AIDS. However, the majority of HIV patients who receive appropriate treatment do well and live healthy lives for years.

For more information contact the CDC National AIDS Hotline: 1 (800) CDC-INFO (232-4636)

Your options

- Have a blood or saliva test for HIV.
- Do not have the test.

If you believe you've been exposed to HIV, it's important to be tested.

Key points to remember

- Health experts recommend having a screening test for HIV if you have a high risk for infection. HIV tests are also recommended for all pregnant women. Some experts, including the CDC, recommend screening for everyone.
- You may not need to be screened for HIV if you aren't sexually active and if you and your doctor have determined that you have a very low risk of getting HIV.
- HIV may not cause symptoms early on. And people who have early symptoms may mistake them for the flu or mononucleosis. So without a test, you may not know that you have an infection.
- If you have a test that shows that you have HIV, you can take steps to prevent spreading HIV to others.
- You may be afraid to be tested for HIV. But if there's any chance you could be infected, it's very important to find out. HIV can be treated, and early treatment can slow down the virus and help you stay healthy.
- Getting treatment may lower the chance that you will give the infection to a sex partner who doesn't have the infection or to your baby, if you are pregnant.¹
- It can take as little as 2 weeks or as long as 6 months from the time you become infected with [HIV](#) for the antibodies to be found in your [blood](#). If you think you have been exposed to HIV but you test negative for it, you should be tested again. Tests given at 6, 12, and 24 weeks can be done to be sure you aren't infected.
- If your test shows that you have HIV, your sex partner(s) will need to know and get tested.

What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, is a virus that attacks the immune system. This makes it hard for the body to fight infection and disease. HIV is the virus that causes [AIDS](#) (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). But having HIV doesn't mean that you have AIDS.

HIV often causes [flu](#)-like symptoms soon after a person gets infected. These early symptoms go away in a few weeks. After that, signs of illness may not appear for many years. But as the virus multiplies in the body, symptoms reappear and then remain. [Fatigue](#), [weight loss](#), fever, night sweats, [diarrhea](#), and other symptoms are common.

Treatment of HIV may prevent or delay HIV from developing into AIDS. If HIV isn't treated and progresses to AIDS, symptoms get worse and the body is less and less able to fight infections like [pneumonia](#) and [tuberculosis](#).

Medicines are the main treatment for HIV. A doctor would likely prescribe several antiretroviral medicines, sometimes called antiretroviral therapy, or ART. By fighting the virus, these medicines can help the immune system stay healthy and delay or prevent AIDS. And they may help a person live longer.

What is the test for HIV?

An [HIV test](#) checks for HIV antibodies in the blood. If HIV antibodies are found, the test is considered positive.

Most doctors use two blood tests, called the ELISA and the Western blot assay. If the first ELISA is positive (meaning that HIV antibodies are found), the blood sample is tested again. If the second test is positive, the doctor will do a Western blot to be sure.

Most test facilities will have the ELISA test results in 2 to 4 days. Results of the Western blot take longer, 1 to 2 weeks. Rapid [antibody tests](#) are available that give results right away. But positive results of the rapid test need to be confirmed by the ELISA or Western blot test.

Even if HIV antibodies aren't found, you may need to be tested again, especially if you think you have been exposed. This is done to make sure that HIV antibodies don't appear at a later time. It can take as little as 2 weeks or as long as 6 months from the time you become infected with HIV for the antibodies to be found in your blood. Tests given at 6, 12, and 24 weeks can be done to be sure you aren't infected.

During this period, an infected person can still spread the infection even though his or her test was negative.

You can get HIV testing in most doctors' offices, public health clinics, hospitals, and Planned [Parenthood](#) clinics. You can also buy a home HIV test kit ([saliva test](#)) in a drugstore or by mail order. But be very careful to choose only a test that has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). If a home test is positive, you'll need to see a doctor to have the result confirmed and to find out what to do next.

Who should consider having an HIV test?

Experts don't fully agree on who should be tested for HIV:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all people should get tested for HIV as part of their regular medical care.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends HIV tests for all adults and adolescents who have a high risk for HIV. The agency recommends screening if:

- You or your sex partner(s) engages in high-risk behavior.
- You're [pregnant](#).
- You've been to a sexually transmitted infection (STI) clinic or a tuberculosis (TB) clinic.

High-risk behavior means that you:

- Are a man who has sex with other men.
- Have multiple sex partners, especially partners who inject [drugs](#).
- Inject drugs or steroids, especially if you share needles, syringes, cookers, or other equipment used to inject drugs.
- Have high-risk partner(s) (a man or woman who has multiple sex partners or injects drugs, or a man who has sex with men).
- Have or have recently had a sexually transmitted infection, such as [syphilis](#) or [genital herpes](#).

Some expert opinions may vary, and your doctor may recommend testing based on your personal history.

Even if you don't think you're at risk, it's worthwhile getting tested once. In some cases people who've had a positive test didn't believe they had a high risk before having the test.

What are the benefits of getting tested?

Getting tested can help find an infection early or when you have no symptoms. This is important so that:

- You can take steps to avoid spreading the infection.
- You can tell your sex partner(s) so they can be tested, get treatment if needed, and avoid spreading the infection.
- You can start treatment right away or as soon as needed. Treatment can help your immune system stay healthy and delay or prevent AIDS. And it may help you live longer. AIDS is the last and most severe stage of HIV infection. Treatment also lowers the chance that you will give the infection to a sex partner who doesn't have the infection.²
- If you are pregnant, you can get early treatment that can reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby.

What are the risks of getting tested?

If your test shows that you have HIV, your sex partner(s) will need to know and get tested, which may affect your relationship.

If you have HIV, state law may require your doctor or the place where you had the test to report it to the state health department. Some states allow anonymous reporting (the person's name or other identifying information is not provided). Other states require confidential reporting (identifying information is provided but only to authorized public health officials).

With an ELISA test, you could have a false-positive test result, which shows that you have the disease when you actually don't. This could cause you unneeded worry until you have more tests to confirm that you don't have the disease.

If you use a home test kit, you could get a fast result, but it will still need to be confirmed with a test that can take several weeks.

Why might your doctor recommend that you have an HIV test?

Your doctor may want you to be tested if:

- You're sexually active.
- You have never had an HIV test.
- You have a high risk for getting HIV.
- You're pregnant.

HIV does not survive well outside the body. **HIV cannot** be spread from one person to another in any of the following ways:

Casual contact

In studies of hundreds of households in which families have lived with and cared for people who have [AIDS](#), including situations in which no one knew that the person was HIV-infected, HIV was spread only when there was sexual contact or needle-sharing with the infected person or contact with the infected person's [blood](#).

Recommended Related to HIV/AIDS

[HIV and Your Diet: Countering Weight Loss](#)

Most people with HIV don't need a special diet. But if you're feeling sick and having symptoms like nausea, diarrhea, or weight loss, you may need some changes to what and how you eat. Losing too much weight can be serious. Without good nutrition, you may get sicker. "Good nutrition is very important for people with HIV," says Brad Hare, MD, director of the HIV/AIDS clinic at San Francisco General Hospital. Without a healthy diet, your body will have a harder time recovering and fighting off i...

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Because HIV is not spread in such settings where exposures are repeated and prolonged and can involve contact with an infected person's body fluids, it is therefore even less likely to be spread in other casual social settings, such as schools and offices.

Saliva, sweat, tears, urine, or feces

HIV cannot be spread by sharing drinking glasses or by casual kissing. The risk of spreading the virus through "deep" kissing in which large amounts of saliva are exchanged is extremely low. Only one unproven case has ever been reported.

No cases of HIV spread have ever been reported after a person has come in contact with the sweat, tears, urine, or feces of an HIV-infected person.

Vaccines

HIV is not spread by vaccines made from blood products, such as the [hepatitis B vaccine](#) and various [immune globulins](#) approved for use in the United States.

- [Hepatitis B](#) vaccine now contains no human tissue or blood.
- The other products are made from screened blood or plasma and undergo purification that destroys any harmful viruses or bacteria.

Insects

HIV is not spread by insects. Insects do not become infected and their saliva does not contain the virus. Blood-sucking insects, such as mosquitoes, do not inject blood into the next person they bite.

Contact with common objects

HIV is not spread by touching common objects such as toilet seats or faucet handles.

Exams and Tests

Getting tested for [HIV](#) can be scary; however, the condition is treatable so it is important to get tested if you think you have been exposed. If you test positive, early detection and monitoring of HIV will help your doctor determine whether the disease is progressing and when to start treatment.

Your doctor may recommend counseling before and after HIV testing, and it is usually available at the hospital or clinic where you will be tested. This will give you an opportunity to:

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- Discuss your fears about being tested.
- Learn how to reduce your risk of becoming infected if your test is negative.
- Learn how to keep from spreading HIV to others if your test is positive.
- Think about personal issues, such as how having HIV will affect you socially, emotionally, professionally, and financially.
- Learn what you need to do to stay healthy as long as possible.

If you've just found out you're [HIV](#)-positive, you may feel overwhelmed, fearful, and alone. Know that you are far from alone. Countless people and resources are available to help you and the more than 1 million HIV-positive people living in the U.S. today.

It may help to remember that being HIV-positive is not the virtual death sentence it once was. HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) causes [AIDS](#) (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). But being HIV-positive does not necessarily mean that you already have AIDS. New treatment regimens have turned being HIV-positive into a chronic condition for many people. With a healthy lifestyle and the right medical care, many HIV-positive people are living long, productive lives.

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[Regina King's Fight Against HIV/AIDS](#)

The November day in 1991 when basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson announced he was HIV-positive was a sobering reality check. All of a sudden, the disease many dismissed as affecting only gay men and intravenous drug users had hit a major

celebrity. But the news struck Regina King especially hard. Then 20 years old and already making a living as an actor in Los Angeles, King had just broken up with her first love and first sexual partner -- a man she knew had cheated on her with at least one...

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Still, learning that you are HIV-positive may leave you reeling. Where should you turn for help? Who should you tell? What should you do first? Here are a few guideposts to help you through this difficult time.

See a HIV/AIDS Doctor Right Away

After finding out you have HIV, fear about the future may make it hard for you to take action. But once you know you're HIV-positive, see a doctor with experience in HIV and AIDS as soon as you can. Don't put it off. Your AIDS doctor will run tests to see how well your immune system is working, how fast the HIV is progressing, and how healthy your body is overall. With this and other information, your doctor can work with you to develop the best treatment plan, including when and how to begin treatment. HIV [drugs](#) can often slow or prevent the progression of HIV to AIDS. Left untreated, though, HIV can lead to serious illness and death.

Learn What It Means to Be HIV-Positive

Information is power, especially when that information can save your life. These steps will allow you to take an active role in your care.

- Read about HIV in other sections of this web site.
- Seek information from government or nonprofit educational organizations with a focus on HIV and AIDS.
- Learn about both experimental and standard [HIV treatments](#), as well as their side effects.
- Talk with others who have been diagnosed as being HIV-positive.

Protect Others From Becoming HIV-Positive

Because you're HIV-positive, you can give the virus to others, even if you don't feel sick. This can happen through unprotected sex or by sharing needles. You can protect others by using [condoms](#) and clean needles. By doing this, you can also protect yourself from other strains of HIV.

If you are a woman, you can spread HIV to your [baby](#) during [pregnancy](#), birth, or [breastfeeding](#). Ask your doctor what you can do to protect your child. Proper treatment has nearly wiped out the spread of infection to newborns in the U.S.

Seek HIV-Positive Support Services

A wide range of people can help provide you with the emotional and physical support you may need to cope with your diagnosis of HIV. Seek the help you need -- whether it's getting a ride to doctor visits or simply finding a sympathetic [ear](#). Here are some steps you can take right away:

- Ask your doctor about local HIV/AIDS support groups. Or, ask for a referral to a [mental health](#) professional, such as a [psychologist](#), psychiatrist, or clinical social worker.
- Find message boards or chat rooms online. Discuss with your doctor the information you get from these sources. Some are accurate; some are not.
- Find a hotline by looking in the yellow pages of your telephone book under "AIDS, HIV Educational Referral and Support Services" or "Social Service Organizations." A person at the hotline can provide you with practical advice or emotional support over the phone. They can also refer you to local HIV/AIDS self-help organizations.

Telling others you're [HIV](#)-positive may be one of the most difficult things you ever do. There may be only one thing that's harder: the burden of carrying the secret alone. That doesn't mean you must tell everyone. Who you tell is a very personal decision. Here are some things to consider as you think about who, when, and how to tell others that you're HIV-positive.

Who Should I Tell That I'm HIV-Positive?

In general, it makes sense to tell those you trust that you're HIV-positive. Doing so may even help foster a greater sense of closeness. Think about people you've shared difficult things with in the past. You may want to start by telling a friend, a family member, or someone you know who is also HIV-positive or has been through a similar experience. These are other people you should tell:

- Your health care providers
- Your past sex or needle-sharing partners
- Your future sex partners
- A family member or trusted friend who is likely to be able to speak for you in a medical emergency.

When considering whom to tell, think about questions like these:

- Could this person harm me physically or emotionally?
- Could this person discriminate against me, putting me at risk for losing my child, job, or housing?
- Can I trust this person and are they likely to be supportive?
- What will I gain by telling this person?

Why Should I Tell People I'm HIV-Positive?

Although you may want to be cautious about whom you tell, once you're ready, there are good reasons to tell certain people that you're HIV-positive.

- You can gain emotional or practical support.
- The person who infected you may not know they're HIV-positive until you tell them.
- You can protect future sex partners, give them the ability to make informed decisions, and enhance the trust between you.
- State laws make it illegal to knowingly infect others. If you have unprotected sex without telling others, you're putting yourself at legal risk, as well as endangering the health of your partners.
- Your health care providers can ensure the best medical care for you.

How Do I Tell People I'm HIV-positive?

There is no one right way to tell others you have HIV. It's often better to do this in person and one-on-one but people have also told others in groups, by phone, or with letters. There are even public health Web sites, such as www.inSPOTLA.org, that allow people to send e-cards to people with whom they've had casual sex. If you are meeting with someone to have this conversation, choose a place that is private and feels comfortable to you, and allow plenty of time to talk.

Here are things to consider when telling the different kinds of people in your life.

Friends and family members. In a perfect world, these would be the easiest people to tell. In reality, they are sometimes the ones most hurt, most fearful, or most angry. And, it often feels as though there's more at stake if things don't go well. However, keeping a secret from those you love can be painful. Be prepared for many different types of reactions.

Children. When is the right time to tell your children? Consider their ages and personalities, and whether or not they've had experiences with illness. It might be a good idea to get professional advice first. Be prepared for many questions:

- - Why did this happen?
 - Am I sick, too? Will I become sick?
 - Will you get better?
 - Who would I live with if you die?

Sex or needle-sharing partner. This is the person who may have infected you -- get your anger out of the way *before* you talk. Express how you feel, but stay calm. If you find it too difficult to tell this person yourself or you fear a reaction, you can enlist the help of your local public health department. Their staff can tell your past partners without giving your name. At the same time, they can offer counseling and testing.

Future sex partners. When it comes to [relationships](#), timing is everything. The same could be said about the timing of telling someone you're HIV-positive. You won't want to be defined by it, but you will need to make sure you tell people you're dating *before* you have sex with them. And choosing a neutral location is better than waiting until you're naked and in bed.

Employer. You are not required to tell your employer you have HIV. But you'll have to if you need changes in your schedule or workload to accommodate your illness. Get a letter from your doctor first. You may also need to reveal that you're HIV positive on an application for Family and Medical Leave. Confirm with your employer that you want this kept confidential, which the law requires.

How Should I Prepare for Telling Someone I'm HIV-Positive?

Don't jump into telling other people you're HIV-positive without first preparing yourself:

- Give others an informational brochure or send them to a Web site or hotline where they can learn more or get support for themselves.
- Be ready for questions. Decide which questions you're comfortable answering.
- Decide how much advice you want from others, then let them know if you just want them to listen instead.
- Be prepared for a variety of reactions. Some may be shocked. Others may fear getting HIV from you. People who distance themselves from you at first may not do so out of a sense of betrayal or lack of caring -- it may be simply fear of losing you. They may just need some time to adjust.
- Remember to make yourself a priority. You cannot control others' reactions. Have a support person lined up to call afterwards or even bring the person with you for the discussion. You might plan to spend the night at a friend's house that night or schedule a therapy session for the next day.
- If you need more support beforehand, join a local HIV-positive support group, contact a local HIV/AIDS organization, or call the National AIDS Hotline (800-CDC-INFO). It's open 24 hours a day.

Due to weakened immune systems, people with HIV can be vulnerable to infections like pneumocystis pneumonia, tuberculosis, candidiasis, cytomegalovirus, and toxoplasmosis. The best way to reduce your risk is to take your HIV medications. Some infections can be prevented with drugs. You can lessen your exposure to some germs by avoiding undercooked meat, litter boxes, and water that may be contaminated.

There are government programs, nonprofit groups, and some pharmaceutical companies that may help cover of the cost of HIV/AIDS drugs. But be aware: These drug "cocktails" can cost \$15,000 a year. Talk to your local HIV/AIDS service organization to learn about financial help

A healthy lifestyle can also help you stay well:

- **Avoid smoking, using illicit drugs and drinking too much alcohol.** These can weaken your immune system.
- **Get tested for tuberculosis (TB) and STDs.** You may have TB or STDs and not know it. These may cause serious illness if not treated.
- **Use condoms.** Abstaining from sex is the most effective way to avoid transmitting HIV to others or to getting other STDs that may harm your health. But if you decide to have sex, use condoms. Condoms are very effective at preventing HIV and other STD transmission, though they aren't 100 percent effective.

- ## Complications: AIDS and Other Health Problems

- [HIV/AIDS and Opportunistic Infections](#)
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) attacks the body's white blood cells -- specifically a subset called CD4 or helper T cells. This attack allows opportunistic infections to take advantage of a weakened immune system, and can lead to illnesses, cancers, or neurological problems.
- [AIDS, HIV, and Pneumocystis Pneumonia \(PCP\)](#)
- Pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP) is a serious infection that causes inflammation and fluid buildup in the lungs.
- [HIV, AIDS, and Cytomegalovirus](#)
- CMV can cause severe disease in people with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). It's able to take advantage of a weakened immune system, which is why it's called an opportunistic infection.
- [HIV, AIDS, and Tuberculosis](#)

- Tuberculosis takes advantage of a weakened immune system, which is why it's called an opportunistic infection. Worldwide, tuberculosis is the leading cause of death for people infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency syndrome).
- [HIV, AIDS, and Mycobacterium Avium Complex](#)
- With HIV, MAC infection usually happens only after you receive a diagnosis of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) and when CD4 cell counts drop below 50.
- [HIV and AIDS Dementia](#)
- AIDS dementia complex is caused by the HIV virus itself, not by the opportunistic infections that occur commonly in the course of the disease. We do not know exactly how the virus damages brain cells.
- [AIDS Wasting Syndrome](#)
- AIDS wasting syndrome occurs when you have AIDS and lose at least 10% of your body weight -- especially muscle. You may also have at least 30 days of diarrhea or extreme weakness and fever that's not related to an infection.
- [HIV, AIDS, and Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma](#)
- People with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) have a weakened immune system. As a result, they are more likely to develop certain cancers. This includes non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL).
- [Lipodystrophy and HIV](#)
- Lipodystrophy is a problem with the way the body produces, uses, and stores fat. It is also called fat redistribution. Since the widespread use of antiretroviral therapy began, the numbers of HIV-positive people with lipodystrophy has increased.
- [HIV, AIDS, and Kaposi's Sarcoma](#)
- Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) is a type of cancer that mainly affects the skin, mouth, and lymph nodes -- infection-fighting glands -- but can also affect other organs such as the lungs and gastrointestinal tract.
- [Preventing Other Infections When You Have HIV](#)
- A person who has HIV has difficulty fighting off other infections. You can help protect the person from infections.

Living & Managing

Being HIV positive isn't a death sentence. Here's a wealth of information on how to live with HIV. Remember, the virus isn't in control -- you are.

Living and Coping

Minority AIDS Initiative

Communities of color have been disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Read more about efforts to prevent the acquisition or transmission of HIV infections in racial and ethnic minority communities.

HIV/AIDS Discrimination and Stigma

The following information can help you learn about ways to cope with AIDS discrimination. It can also help you better understand civil rights for HIV-positive people.

Telling Others You're HIV-Positive

Who you tell is a very personal decision. Here are some things to consider as you think about who, when, and how to tell others that you're HIV-positive.

Talking to Your Children About HIV and AIDS

Here's why it's so important and some tips for starting to think -- and talk -- to children about HIV.

Nutrition and HIV/AIDS

Making improvements in your diet can improve your health and how well you feel. Here are a few tips that may help. A registered dietitian (RD) can give you even more guidance.

AIDS and Social Security Disability Insurance

Disability insurance provides you regular payments when you are not able to work due to illness or injury. If you have a disability and AIDS, you may be able to obtain one or more types of disability insurance.