

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV) AND PREGNANCY

HIV basics

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system allowing other infections to occur. Advanced HIV infection is called Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

HIV can be spread when the body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk) of an infected person enter another's body. In adults, the virus is most often spread through sexual contact or by sharing needles. Most children who are infected get the virus from their infected mothers during pregnancy, at the time of birth, or through breastfeeding. With the current screening guidelines, spread through blood transfusion is rare.

Symptoms of HIV are not specific and may have other causes. Most persons with HIV have no symptoms at all for several years. The only way to determine whether someone infected is to be tested for HIV. For those infected, early symptoms (weeks to months after exposure) can include flu-like symptoms, rash, and swollen lymph nodes. Late symptoms (years after exposure) include persistent fevers, night sweats, prolonged diarrhea, unexplained weight loss, purple bumps on the skin or inside the mouth and nose, chronic fatigue, swollen lymph nodes, and recurrent respiratory infections.

An exposure is defined as direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person. Contact includes getting blood or body fluids in open cuts or wounds (that are less than 24 hours old), splashes of blood or body fluids into the eyes or mouth, being stuck with a needle or other sharp object that has blood on it, or having sex or sharing needles with someone with HIV. A baby can get HIV from its infected mother during childbirth and from drinking breast milk from an infected mother.

Anyone who has an exposure to a person infected with HIV should have a blood test to determine whether or not they have been infected with the virus. The test should be repeated 3 months after exposure to completely rule out infection.

HIV and pregnancy

All pregnant women should be tested for HIV early in their pregnancy. If a woman is infected with HIV during her pregnancy, there is a chance that she could give the infection to her baby. About 25% of babies of infected mothers who do not receive antiretroviral treatment become infected, whereas, transmission can be reduced to less than 1% when the mother receives antiretroviral treatment. The infant can become infected anytime during pregnancy, but infection usually happens just before or during delivery. Women who are infected with HIV should not breastfeed their babies, because HIV can be transmitted via breast milk. Pre-chewing food for infants also creates a transmission risk.

HIV infection can be diagnosed in most infants by 1 month of age, and in all infants by 6 months using special viral diagnostic tests. Children and adults older than 18 months are diagnosed using an antibody test. Infants younger than 18 months need special tests that detect the HIV virus in the body and differentiate between passively acquired maternal antibodies.

Exposure to HIV during pregnancy

If pregnant women are exposed to HIV, they should consult their health care provider for information about diagnosis, possible lab tests, and follow-up.

Testing for HIV

The only way to determine HIV infection is through testing. A person cannot rely on symptoms to know whether or not they are infected with HIV. Most people who are infected with HIV do not have any symptoms for many years.

There are several steps to test for HIV. A health care provider will make recommendations for appropriate testing and follow-up testing.

HIV prevention

Pregnant women can do the below to protect themselves against HIV:

- Use condoms during all sexual encounters (vaginal, anal and oral). Limit the number of partners.
- Wear gloves when handling blood and body fluids. Note that there are no special precautions for handling breast milk in a childcare setting (see Section 3).
- Wear gloves when cleaning and disinfecting objects or surfaces contaminated with blood (see Section 2). Wash hands after removing gloves.
- Do not share personal care items, such as toothbrushes, razors, or nail clippers.
- Do not share needles to inject drugs or to perform tattoos or body piercings.
- A prescription antiviral drug (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is now available for high-risk people to take daily to reduce risk of infection.

For more information, call the Minnesota Department of Health at (651) 201-5414, call your local health department, or the Minnesota AIDS Project hotline at (612) 373-AIDS (Twin Cities), (800) 248-AIDS (statewide), (612) 373-2465 TTY metro, (888) 820-2437 TTY statewide

