

How can I protect myself from getting HIV?

You can reduce the likelihood of getting HIV by:

- having sex with one partner who is HIV negative or living with HIV and on effective treatment
- using condoms every time you have vaginal or anal sex
- not sharing sex toys, or covering the toy with a new condom for each partner if you do
- not sharing needles or other injecting equipment (spoons, filters, water, etc.)
- taking post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) if you have been exposed to HIV
- taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) if you are likely to have ongoing exposures to HIV

What is pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)?

PrEP stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP is taken by HIV negative people before having sex (pre-exposure) and after sex, to prevent HIV (this is called prophylaxis).

PrEP has been shown in many studies to be safe, and when taken correctly, highly effective at preventing HIV.

PrEP is available through the HSE free of charge to those who are considered to be at increased risk of contracting HIV through sex.

For further information on PrEP and how to access PrEP, visit www.sexualwellbeing.ie/prep

What if I test positive for HIV?

If you test positive for HIV you can get the essential treatment and care to live a healthy life and prevent transmission to your partner(s).

What about my partner?

If you test positive for HIV, your current partner(s) should also be tested.

Some of your previous partners may also need to be tested. You can discuss this further with your doctor or nurse at the HIV clinic.

Can HIV be treated?

Yes, HIV can be treated and managed effectively with medications.

If you test positive for HIV, you will be referred to a specialist HIV clinic, and your doctor and nurse will explain the treatment options to you.

HIV treatment stops HIV reproducing in the body. When taken properly the medication enables most people with HIV live a long and healthy life.

When taken properly, HIV treatment also reduces the chance of a person living with HIV passing HIV on to someone else. When a person living with HIV takes their treatment properly, and the viral load is (and remains) undetectable, there is effectively no risk that HIV can be passed on to their sexual partners.

If you have HIV, the earlier you are diagnosed and can start on treatment, the better.

At present there is no cure for HIV which means that treatment is lifelong.

For further information on HIV treatment, see the patient information leaflet: *Antiretroviral Therapy for People Living with HIV in Ireland* on sexualwellbeing.ie/HIV.

HIV testing in pregnancy

Screening for HIV in pregnancy is a routine part pregnancy care and is usually done during the first antenatal visit. If you test negative for HIV at your first antenatal visit but think you are at ongoing risk of HIV it is important to discuss this with your antenatal team.

If a person tests positive for HIV during pregnancy, they are immediately referred to a specialist HIV service where a management plan is developed to minimise the likelihood the baby getting HIV. This includes taking anti-HIV medication, monitoring the response to medication and making a plan for delivery.

In Ireland, when the management plan is in place, the chance of a baby getting HIV is less than 1 in 1000.

You can order more copies of this leaflet free of charge from www.healthpromotion.ie

Produced by the HSE Sexual Health Programme



A guide to HIV



sexualwellbeing.ie



January 2025

What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the human immune system and weakens its ability to fight infection and disease.

Effective HIV treatment keeps the immune system strong and prevents illness. It also prevents HIV being passed on to others.

Untreated HIV can lead to serious illness, death and the risk of transmission to other people.

How do I get HIV?

- From having sex (vaginal or anal) without a condom or PrEP, with a person who is living with HIV and not on effective HIV treatment
- From sharing needles or works (injecting equipment) with a person who is living with HIV and not on effective HIV treatment
- Babies during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding where a person who is living with HIV is not on effective HIV treatment
- Receiving HIV contaminated blood products (extremely unlikely in Ireland as all blood donations are tested)
- Very rarely through oral sex without a condom with a person who is living with HIV and not on effective treatment (this risk is extremely low)
- Very rarely through human bite from a person who is living with HIV and not on effective treatment (this risk is extremely low)

You cannot get HIV from:

- touching, hugging or kissing
- coughing or sneezing
- sharing a glass, cup, cutlery or other utensils
- contact with saliva, sweat or urine
- sharing a public toilet

Treatment as prevention (TasP)

When a person living with HIV is on treatment and the level of virus (viral load) in the body is so low that it cannot be detected (is 'undetectable'), HIV cannot be transmitted to sexual partners. This is also known as 'undetectable equals untransmittable' (U=U).

What symptoms would I have with HIV?

Some people may experience a flu-like illness when they first get HIV. If you have these symptoms after a potential exposure to HIV, you should have a HIV test.

Many people are unaware that they have HIV because they may not feel sick right away or for many years after getting HIV. If you have potentially been exposed to HIV, it is important to get tested.

Over time, the virus attacks your immune system and you may keep getting infections and other illnesses.

The only way to find out if you have HIV is to have a HIV test.

How can I be tested for HIV?

HIV is diagnosed with a blood test. Free home STI/HIV testing is available through the HSE. For more information and to order a test, visit www.sexualwellbeing.ie/hometesting

All public STI clinics offer free HIV testing. These are listed on <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/hse-sti-services-in-ireland.html>

Some GPs provide HIV testing or can arrange for you to have a test.

Rapid HIV testing is also available through some community outreach programmes. The test is carried out by taking a finger prick sample of blood and the results are available in minutes.

It is really important if you are having a HIV test to know the **window period** for the test.

The window period is the time between when you may have been exposed to HIV, and the point when the test will give an accurate result. During the window period a person can have HIV but still receive a negative HIV test. Your healthcare provider or community organisation will advise you if you need to come back to repeat the HIV test at the end of the window period. Most rapid HIV tests have a window period of 3 months.

For key populations vulnerable to acquiring HIV, such as gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs, it is important to get tested for HIV regularly. If you do have HIV, knowing as soon as possible gives you the opportunity to start treatment.

If you have had sex without a condom, it is recommended that you also test for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Free STI testing is available through the free home STI testing service and at public STI clinics.

How soon after exposure should I get a HIV test?

If you think you may have been exposed to HIV, you should get medical advice as soon as possible. You will be tested straight away and may need to repeat the HIV test after the window period. This will depend on how long ago your potential exposure for HIV was. Your healthcare provider will explain this to you.

What is post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)?

PEP stands for post-exposure prophylaxis. PEP is a course of medication that you need to start as soon as possible and no later than 72 hours (3 days and nights) after you have been exposed to HIV. PEP reduces the chance of you becoming HIV positive.

If you think you have had a recent potential exposure to HIV you should go to your nearest STI/GUM clinic or Hospital Emergency Department (outside of clinic hours) as soon as possible to see if you need to start on PEP. PEP is available for free but there may be a charge for attending the emergency department.

For more information on PEP and where to access PEP, visit <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/need-urgent-information-and-care/post-exposure-prophylaxis/>