

WHO | HIV/AIDS

Online Q&A

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HIV/AIDS

What is HIV?

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infects cells of the immune system, destroying or impairing their function. Infection with the virus results in the progressive deterioration of the immune system, leading to "immune deficiency." The immune system is considered deficient when it can no longer fulfill its role of fighting infection and disease. Infections associated with severe immunodeficiency are known as "opportunistic infections," because they take advantage of a weakened immune system.

What is AIDS?

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a surveillance term defined by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and by the European Centre for the Epidemiological Monitoring of AIDS (EuroHIV). The term AIDS applies to the most advanced stages of HIV infection, defined by the occurrence of any of more than 20 opportunistic infections or HIV-related cancers.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV can be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal), and oral sex with an infected person; transfusion of contaminated blood; and the sharing of contaminated needles, syringes or other sharp instruments. It may also be transmitted between a mother and her infant during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

How quickly does a person infected with HIV develop AIDS?

The length of time can vary widely between individuals. Left untreated, the majority of people infected with HIV will develop signs of HIV-related illness within 5-10 years. However, the time between HIV infection and an AIDS diagnosis can be 10–15 years, sometimes longer. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) can slow the disease progression by decreasing an infected person's viral load.

What is the most common life-threatening opportunistic infection affecting people living with HIV/AIDS?

Tuberculosis (TB) kills nearly a quarter of a million people living with HIV each year. It is the number one cause of death among HIV-infected people in Africa, and a leading cause of death in this population worldwide. Three core health-care strategies are critical to reverse the course of HIV/TB: intensified case finding (ICF) for active TB isoniazid preventive treatment (IPT) TB infection control (IC). More about the HIV/TB "dual epidemic"

How many people are living with HIV?

According to estimates by WHO and UNAIDS, 33.4 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2008. That same year, some 2.7 million people became newly infected, and 2.0 million died of AIDS, including 280 000 children. Two thirds of HIV infections are in sub-Saharan Africa.

How can I limit my risk of HIV transmission through sex?

Use male or female condoms correctly each time you have sex. Practice only non-penetrative sex. Remain faithful in a relationship with an uninfected equally faithful partner with no other risk behaviour. Abstain from sex.

Does male circumcision prevent HIV transmission?

Recent studies suggest that male circumcision can reduce the risk of acquiring HIV through sex. However, it is not 100% effective, and circumcised men can still become infected. Circumcision can actually increase the risk of transmission if the wounds have not properly healed following surgery. In addition, HIV-positive men who are circumcised can infect their sexual partners. While male circumcision is not a replacement for other known methods of HIV prevention, it should be considered as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

How effective are condoms in preventing HIV?

Quality-assured male and female condoms are the only products currently available to protect against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. When used properly during every sexual intercourse, condoms are a proven means of preventing HIV infection in women and men. However, apart from abstinence, no protective method is 100% effective.

What is a female condom?

The female condom is the only female-controlled contraceptive barrier method currently on the market. The female condom is a strong, soft, transparent polyurethane sheath inserted in the vagina before sexual intercourse. It entirely lines the vagina and provides protection against both pregnancy and STIs, including HIV, when used correctly in each act of intercourse.

What is the benefit of an HIV test?

Knowing your HIV status can have two important benefits: If you learn that you are HIV positive, you can take the necessary steps before symptoms appear to access treatment, care and support, thereby potentially prolonging your life for many years. If you know that you are infected, you can take precautions to prevent the spread of HIV to others.

What are antiretroviral drugs?

Antiretroviral drugs are used in the treatment and prevention of HIV infection. They fight HIV by stopping or interfering with the reproduction of the virus in the body.

What is the current status of antiretroviral treatment (ART)?

Approximately 4 million people in low- and middle-income countries were receiving HIV antiretroviral therapy at the end of 2008. Until 2003, the high cost of the medicines, weak or inadequate health-care infrastructure, and lack of financing prevented wide use of combination antiretroviral treatment in low- and middle-income countries. But in recent years, increased political and financial commitment has allowed dramatic expansion of access to HIV therapy.

Is there a cure for HIV?

No, there is no cure for HIV. But with good and continued adherence to antiretroviral treatment, the progression of HIV in the body can be slowed to a near halt. Increasingly, people living with HIV are kept well and productive for extended periods of time, even in low-income countries.

What other kinds of care do people living with HIV need?

In addition to antiretroviral treatment, people with HIV often need counselling and psychosocial support. Access to good nutrition, safe water and basic hygiene can also help an HIV-infected person maintain a high quality of life.

Related links

- WHO programme on HIV/AIDS
- Topical overview: HIV/AIDS