



# WHAT IS AIDS?

## WHAT DOES "AIDS" MEAN?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome:

- *Acquired* means you can get infected with it.
- *Immune Deficiency* means a weakness in the body's system that fights diseases.
- *Syndrome* means a group of health problems that make up a disease.

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. If you get infected with HIV, your body will try to fight the infection. It will make "antibodies," special molecules to fight HIV.

A blood test for HIV looks for these antibodies. If you have them in your blood, it means that you have HIV infection. People who have the HIV antibodies are called "HIV-Positive." Fact Sheet 102 has more information on HIV testing.

Being HIV-positive, or having HIV disease, is not the same as having AIDS. Many people are HIV-positive but don't get sick for many years. As HIV disease continues, it slowly wears down the immune system. Viruses, parasites, fungi, and bacteria that usually don't cause any problems can make you very sick if your immune system is damaged. These are called "opportunistic infections." See Fact Sheet 500 for an overview of opportunistic infections.

## HOW DO YOU GET AIDS?

You don't actually "get" AIDS. You might get infected with HIV, and later you might develop AIDS. You can get infected with HIV from anyone who's infected, even if they don't look sick and even if they haven't tested HIV-positive yet. The blood, vaginal fluid, semen, and breast milk of people infected with HIV has enough of the virus in it to infect other people. Most people get the HIV virus by:

- having sex with an infected person
- sharing a needle (shooting drugs) with someone who's infected
- being born when their mother is infected, or drinking the breast milk of an infected woman

Getting a transfusion of infected blood used to be a way people got AIDS, but now the blood supply is screened very carefully and the risk is extremely low.

There are no documented cases of HIV being transmitted by tears or saliva, but it is

possible to be infected with HIV through oral sex or in rare cases through deep kissing, especially if you have open sores in your mouth or bleeding gums. For more information, see the following Fact Sheets:

- 150: Stopping the Spread of HIV
- 151: Safer Sex Guidelines
- 152: How Risky Is It?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 to 1.2 million US residents are living with HIV infection or AIDS; about a quarter of them do not know they have it. About 75 percent of the 40,000 new infections each year are in men, and about 25 percent in women. About half of the new infections are in Blacks, even though they make up only 12 percent of the US population. In the mid-1990s, AIDS was a leading cause of death. However, newer treatments have cut the AIDS death rate significantly.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I'M HIV POSITIVE?

You might not know if you get infected by HIV. Some people get fever, headache, sore muscles and joints, stomach ache, swollen lymph glands, or a skin rash for one or two weeks. Most people think it's the flu. Some people have no symptoms. Fact Sheet 103 has more information on the early stage of HIV infection.

The virus will multiply in your body for a few weeks or even months before your immune system responds. During this time, you won't test positive for HIV, but you can infect other people.

When your immune system responds, it starts to make antibodies. When this happens, you will test positive for HIV. After the first flu-like symptoms, some people with HIV stay healthy for ten years or longer. But during this time, HIV is damaging your immune system.

One way to measure the damage to your immune system is to count your CD4 cells. These cells, also called "T-helper" cells, are an important part of the immune system. Healthy people have between 500 and 1,500 CD4 cells in a milliliter of blood. Fact Sheet 124 has more information on CD4 cells.

Without treatment, your CD4 cell count will most likely go down. You might start having signs of HIV disease like fevers, night sweats, diarrhea, or swollen lymph nodes. If

you have HIV disease, these problems will last more than a few days, and probably continue for several weeks.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE AIDS?

HIV disease becomes AIDS when your immune system is seriously damaged. If you have less than 200 CD4 cells or if your CD4 percentage is less than 14%, you have AIDS. See Fact Sheet 124 for more information on CD4 cells. If you get an opportunistic infection, you have AIDS. There is an "official" list of opportunistic infections, put out by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The most common ones are:

- PCP (Pneumocystis pneumonia), a lung infection; see Fact Sheet 515
- KS (Kaposi's sarcoma), a skin cancer, Fact Sheet 511
- CMV (Cytomegalovirus), an infection that usually affects the eyes, Fact Sheet 504
- Candida, a fungal infection that can cause thrush (a white film in your mouth) or infections in your throat or vagina, Fact Sheet 501

AIDS-related diseases also include serious weight loss, brain tumours, and other health problems. Without treatment, these opportunistic infections can kill you.

AIDS is different in every infected person. Some people die a few months after getting infected, while others live fairly normal lives for many years, even after they "officially" have AIDS. A few HIV-positive people stay healthy for many years even without taking antiretroviral medications (ARVs).

## IS THERE A CURE FOR AIDS?

There is no cure for AIDS. There are drugs that can slow down the HIV virus and slow down the damage to your immune system. There is no way to "clear" HIV from the body.

Other drugs can prevent or treat opportunistic infections (OIs). In most cases, these drugs work very well. The newer, stronger ARVs have also helped reduce the rates of most OIs. A few OIs, however, are still very difficult to treat. See Fact Sheet 500 for more information on opportunistic infections.

**Prof Elna McIntosh**