

INFORMATION FOR TEENS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

What's the big deal about HIV and AIDS?

It's easy to think that HIV and AIDS is something for other people like drug users and sex workers to worry about.

This is wrong. Everyone, from teens and young people, to adults, whoever you are, wherever you live, need to take the threat of HIV seriously. To be able to protect yourself, you need to know the facts, and know how to avoid becoming infected with HIV.

Isn't it only a problem for adults?

No. HIV is a big problem for young people, as well as adults.

Today, young people between the age of 15 and 24 account for almost 45% of all new HIV infections with an estimated 5.5 million young people living with HIV.¹

Every day, 6,000 young people become infected with HIV – that's more than five every minute.

MONICA:

'I am 15 years old. My best friend is male and we were really close.

One night we experimented and after we "did it", he told me that he had AIDS.'

What's the difference between HIV and AIDS?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that damages the body's immune system. Our immune system defends us against any illnesses. This means that people who have HIV can get really sick when a healthy person would normally fight it off quite easily.

HIV causes **AIDS** (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). AIDS is the late stage of HIV infection, when the immune system has been damaged to the point that people can no longer fight off any illnesses.

There is no way of getting rid of HIV once you have it in your body, as there is no cure yet. People infected with HIV ('HIV-positive' people) may look and feel healthy for many years. However, even when they are feeling well they can pass the virus on to others. New medicines can help HIV-positive people feel healthier and live longer.

How long does it take for HIV to cause AIDS?

The length of time between being infected with HIV and being diagnosed with AIDS depends on a lot of different things.

These days, there are many drugs that can be used to help people with HIV, and most doctors believe that a lot of people can be treated for a very long time. Many people do not know exactly when they were infected with HIV, so the length of time between this happening and them being diagnosed with AIDS can vary from person to person.

¹ UNAIDS, Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 2008

So how do you get infected?

HIV is passed on in the sexual fluids or blood of an HIV-infected person. If this infected blood or sexual fluids get into your body, then you are likely to be infected too. This usually happens by either having **sexual intercourse** with an infected person or by **sharing needles** with someone who is infected.

An infant can also become infected by being born to a mother who has HIV. Vertical transmission, where the disease is transmitted from mother to child, can take place during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding. Malaysia however provides free antiretroviral treatment for HIV-positive mothers to protect babies from being born with HIV.

Can I get HIV through social contact?

You cannot get the virus from breathing the same air as a person with HIV.

HIV is not transmitted by: hugging, shaking hands; casual, everyday contact; using swimming pools, toilet seats; sharing bed linens, eating utensils, food; mosquito and other insect bites; coughing or sneezing.

Body fluid containing HIV must be able to pass into another person's body through a break in the tissue/skin to cause an infection.

How can I protect myself from HIV?

Abstinence: The only way to be 100 per cent sure you do not become infected with HIV through sexual contact is abstinence: in other words, simply not having vaginal, anal or oral sex.

In addition to protecting you from HIV, abstinence is also the only 100 per cent safeguard against contracting STIs. And not having sex is the only completely foolproof method of preventing pregnancy as well.

Being faithful: If you and your partner only have sex with each other, and neither of you is HIV-positive, there is no risk at all that either of you will be infected.

However, to establish that neither of you are infected with HIV, you will both have to have an HIV test. Being faithful is no protection if one of you already has HIV from a previous relationship. Even if your partner did not get infected in a previous relationship, remember that there are various ways of getting infected and that someone who is HIV-positive may not look ill.

Condoms: When you do have penetrative sex, always use latex condoms. Using condoms properly is a very effective method of contraception and protection from infections.

Using a condom is also known as "safer sex" as there is still some risk in acquiring HIV since condoms can break if not stored or used properly (for example from a fingernail scratch) or it can slip off.

Sex

The most common way of spreading the infection by exchanging bodily fluids is through unprotected penetrative sexual intercourse. 'Unprotected' means sex without a condom.

Being infected with other sexually transmitted infections (STI) makes HIV transmission more likely because STIs can damage the tissue/skin of the sexual organs. This makes it easier for infected blood to enter the bloodstream. If you suspect you may have an STI, you should see a health professional as STIs can also cause other serious health problems.

Girls and women are at least twice as more likely to get HIV through vaginal sex with HIV infected males than the other way around. This biological vulnerability is worsened by the fact that women may find it harder to avoid sex with an infected person or insist on condom use due to social and cultural expectations.

What about using drugs?

The only way to be safe around drugs is not to take them. If you are on drugs you may take risks you normally wouldn't take, and you may have unsafe sex when you would normally be more careful.

If you are injecting drugs, you should always use a clean syringe each time you inject, and never share any of these syringes with anyone else.

How about tattooing and body piercings?

If you want to have a tattoo or piercing, make sure the tattooist or piercer explains all their safety measures first.

The tattooist or piercer should wear gloves, use a new, sterilised needle, and then discard that needle after he/she has used it.

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol and other drugs don't cause HIV infection.

However, when on drugs you might find it more difficult to use a condom or you might forget altogether.

One of the most common drugs this can happen with is alcohol.

If you're drunk, you might not always know what you're doing, or you might not care.

LEWIS:

'All the kids in school thought I was so cool cos' I partied a lot.

Then on my 16th birthday, my friends and I got really drunk and I ended up with a stranger.

We had sex and we didn't use a condom. It was only that one time. That was all it took to get HIV.'

Can you get infected your first time?

Yes. If your partner has HIV and you have unsafe sex or share a needle or syringe, then you can become infected the first time, and any other time thereafter.

Is there a cure?

There is still no cure for HIV. And while new drugs are helping some people who have HIV live longer, healthier lives, there are still many problems associated with them.

Anti-HIV drugs are highly toxic and can cause serious side effects, including heart damage, kidney failure, and osteoporosis.

Many (perhaps even most) patients cannot tolerate long-term treatment of a cocktail of 3-4 antiviral medications known as 'Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy' (HAART).

How can I tell if someone's infected with HIV?

You cannot tell just by looking at someone whether they are infected with HIV. Someone can be infected but have no symptoms and still look perfectly healthy. They themselves might not know that they are HIV-positive because they look perfectly healthy.

The only way to know if a person is infected, or not, is if they have a blood test.

How can I get tested?

If you think you might have been exposed to HIV, you should get tested immediately.

Knowing your HIV status early will make it easier for you to make decisions and take steps to protect your long-term health.

Taking an active approach to managing HIV may give you many more years of healthy life than if you waited and did nothing.

If you are HIV positive, you will also be conscious in taking measures to protect others from becoming infected.

IMPORTANT: It is important to receive both pre- and post test counseling when you go for your test. You can contact any of the NGOs listed for further advice.

What will they do?

Before they do anything, the doctor or nurse will ask if you're sure you want to have a test. They will usually take a sample of blood from you to examine. If you also want to be tested for STD's, they may take a urine sample, or they might ask if they can take a swab from the vagina or penis. Some places can give you the results on the same day, in other places you may have to wait for a week or more. While you wait, you shouldn't have sexual contact with anyone.

How can I play my part?

Everyone has a role to play to stop the spread of HIV. Here are just a few suggestions on how you can make a difference:

- get tested for HIV
- avoid high risk behaviours, e.g using drugs
- practice safer behaviours to prevent HIV
- spread the word about HIV prevention with family and friends – tell them the facts
- speak out against stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive people
- provide support to people living with HIV and AIDS
- organise an event in your community!

WHERE TO GO

Government hospitals and clinics

You can also contact any of the following NGOs for advice and counseling. Some also provide anonymous testing. (NGOs with *)

Community AIDS Service Penang *
(04) 656 1554

Kuala Lumpur AIDS Support Services Society
(03) 6253 1684

Malaysian AIDS Council
(03) 4045-1033

PT Foundation *
(03) 4044 5455 or (03) 4044 5466
Mon-Fri, 7:30pm – 9:30pm

Sarawak AIDS Concern Society
(082) 252 300