What is HIV?
Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks and weakens the immune system. Unless people with HIV receive treatment, they eventually will get serious infections or cancers—this is called AIDS. Even people without symptoms suffer ongoing damage to their immune systems, and they can pass the virus to others. People infected with HIV may have no symptoms for many years. In the United States, about 1.3 million people are living with HIV, and every year as many as 40,000 people are newly infected.

How is HIV spread?
HIV is spread mainly through exposure to semen, vaginal fluid, anal fluid, blood, or breast milk from a person who is HIV positive. You can get infected with HIV from:
- Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom or other latex barrier
- It is possible, but very uncommon, to get HIV from having oral sex without a condom or latex barrier
- Sharing equipment to inject, snort, or smoke drugs
- Getting tattoos or body piercings with unsterilized needles
- Experiencing accidental needle sticks
- Having other blood exposures
HIV can also pass from HIV-infected mothers to their babies in the womb, during birth, and during breastfeeding.

How can I protect myself from infection with HIV?
There is no vaccine to prevent HIV, and no cure for HIV, but there ARE ways you can reduce your risk of becoming HIV infected.

Practice safer sex
- If you have multiple sex partners, or any partner with HIV infection, use “protection” all the time.
  - Use PrEP. PrEP involves taking a pill once a day. It can prevent HIV infection if it is taken every day. It is most effective if used in combination with condoms. Discuss PrEP with your health care provider.
  - Use a condom, dental dam, or other latex barrier and avoid “rough sex” or other activities that might cause bleeding.
- Receptive anal sex is the highest-risk activity for becoming infected with HIV.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis A virus (HAV).
- Get tested and treated for hepatitis C (HCV), HBV, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia or herpes. Having STIs puts you at greater risk of also becoming infected with HIV through sexual contact.
Drug use
Talk with your health care provider or a substance abuse counselor about treatment to help you stop using drugs. If you can’t stop, following the suggestions below will help you protect yourself from HIV as well as HCV and other infections that can be passed through blood.

- **Injecting drugs**
  - Consider PrEP. This involves taking a pill once a day to prevent HIV infection. Discuss PrEP with your health care provider.
  - Sharing needles, syringes, or any equipment used to inject drugs with someone who has HIV puts you at extremely high risk of becoming infected with HIV.
  - If you inject drugs, don’t share your syringes, needles, filters, water, water containers, cookers, cotton, or ties with anyone else.
  - Make sure the needles and injecting equipment you use are new (or sterilized), every time. Do not borrow needles or equipment from friends. Get sterile needles and syringes from a reliable source like a pharmacy or needle exchange program, if available.
  - If you must reuse equipment, mark all your equipment so you know it’s yours.
  - Always clean your skin with alcohol, disinfectant, or (less preferably) soap and water before injecting.
  - Use an extra, sterile syringe for splitting drugs using your own cooker and cotton.
  - If you must share or reuse a syringe or needle, clean it with undiluted bleach for at least 30 seconds. It is important to rinse the syringe and needle with sterile water after cleaning them with bleach so that you don’t inject the bleach into your body.

- **Snorting drugs**
  - Snorting drugs can cause bleeding on the inside of your nose. Use your own snorting straws and do not share with friends.

- **Smoking drugs from hot pipes**
  - Smoking drugs from a crack pipe can cause your lips to crack or burn. Use your own pipe, or cover a shared pipe with your own rubber stem.

Tattoos and piercings
- Only get tattoos and piercings done in professional, regulated studios that display a certificate from the state in which they are located.
- Make sure the body artists are licensed in the state where they are working.
- Needles and ink pots should be used only on a single person. Tools that make contact with blood should be sterilized. Artists should wear single-use latex or nitrile gloves.
- The risk of HIV infection is higher than average when tattoos and piercings are done in prison or by friends.

Sharing personal care items
- Do not use personal care items belonging to someone who might have HIV if the items could have blood on them, for example, razors, toothbrushes, and toothpicks.

Silicone, steroid, and hormone injections
- Only get injections if they are administered by a licensed care professional.
- Always use new, sterile needles/syringes.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)
- PrEP is taken as a daily medication that can lower your risk of becoming infected with HIV together with the other prevention methods mentioned above.
- PrEP appears to be more than 90% effective at preventing HIV for people who take it very regularly, but is not effective for people who do not take it or who take it only sometimes.

What should I do if I think I might have been exposed to HIV?
Get tested! HIV can be treated. Find out as soon as possible so you can start treatment, prevent immune system damage from the virus, allow your immune system to recover, and make sure you don’t spread HIV to others. Today’s treatments allow most people to live long and healthy lives, and help prevent transmission of HIV to sex partners. Learn more at www.hiv.va.gov.
Should I be tested for anything else?

- Anyone at risk of HIV infection should also be tested for hepatitis C, and hepatitis B.
- Anyone who is at risk of becoming infected with HIV through sex should also be tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Having an STI puts you at greater risk of also becoming infected with hepatitis B or hepatitis C through sexual contact.
- If you have hepatitis B, hepatitis C, or STIs, you should be treated for them.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis B and hepatitis A, unless you are already immune to them.

How can I get help if I have VHA benefits?

- Speak with your VA health care provider
- Contact the OEF/OIF Coordinator at your local VA Medical Center
- Contact your local Vet Center (https://www.va.gov/directory)
- Call VA's general information hotline at 1-800-827-1000
- Learn about drug use treatment options online at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp

Other Resources

Free, fast, and confidential HIV testing: https://gettested.cdc.gov/ or 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)

Drug treatment centers: https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/or 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Needle exchange programs: https://nasen.org/directory/

How to protect yourself and others when using drugs: http://harmreduction.org/our-resources/

Instructions for cleaning injection equipment: http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/cleaning-equipment-injecting-drugs