

HIV Prevention

Patient Information

What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks and weakens the immune system. In the United States, about 1.1 million people are living with HIV and about 14% of them don't know they have it. Prevention, testing and treatment can help in our efforts to end the HIV epidemic.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread mainly through exposure to semen, vaginal fluid, anal fluid, blood, or breast milk from a person who has HIV. HIV can be spread by:

- ▶ Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom or other latex barrier. It is possible, but very uncommon, to get HIV from 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
- ▶ Mothers with HIV can also pass it 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.

Use PrEP

- ▶ Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis or PrEP is taken as a daily medication that can lower your risk of becoming infected with HIV.
- ▶ PrEP is very effective at preventing HIV for people at risk. Studies have shown that PrEP reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by more than 90% when taken daily. Among people who inject drugs, PrEP reduces the risk of getting HIV by at least 74% when taken daily.

- ▶ PrEP is available at VA. Talk to your provider about whether it is right for you.

Practice safer sex

- ▶ Receptive anal sex is the highest-risk activity for becoming infected with HIV.
- ▶ Use a condom, dental dam, or other latex barrier and avoid "rough sex" or other activities that might cause bleeding. You can ask your VA provider to "prescribe" you condoms at no cost.
- ▶ Get tested and treated for hepatitis C, hepatitis B, 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.

Practice safer drug use

- ▶ VA has treatment options to help you stop injecting or snorting drugs. Talk to your provider to learn more.
- ▶ If you can't or aren't ready to stop, you can protect yourself from HIV and other infections by practicing safer drug use.
- ▶ Sharing needles, syringes, and other equipment can put you at high risk. Ask your provider about whether a sterile syringe program is available locally.
- ▶ If you must reuse equipment, make sure you:
 - 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 bleach into your body.



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- 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 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.

Other things to remember

- ▶ Only get tattoos and piercings done in professional, regulated studios that display a certificate from the state in which they are located.
- ▶ The risk of HIV infection is higher than average when tattoos and piercings are done in prison or by friends.
- ▶ Do not use personal care items belonging to someone who might have HIV if the items could have blood on them (e.g. razors, toothbrushes, toothpicks).
- ▶ Only get silicone, steroid or hormone injections if they are administered by a licensed care professional.
- ▶ Always use new, sterile needles/syringes.

What should I do if I think I might have been exposed to HIV?

Get tested! HIV can be treated. Starting treatment early prevents immune system damage from the virus, allows your immune system to recover, and helps prevent the spread of HIV to others. Today's treatments allow most people to live long and healthy lives, and help prevent transmission of HIV to sex partners. If it is within 72 hours of your potential exposure to HIV, contact your provider about **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)**.

Should I be tested for anything else?

- ▶ Anyone at risk for HIV should also be tested for hepatitis C and hepatitis B.
- ▶ Anyone who is at risk for HIV through sex should also be tested for other STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis.
- ▶ Get vaccinated for hepatitis B and hepatitis A, unless you are already immune to them.

VA Resources

- ▶ Talk with your VA provider about PrEP, condoms, testing, substance use programs, and other services to help prevent HIV.
- ▶ Learn about substance use treatment options: <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp>
- ▶ Learn more about PrEP: <https://www.hiv.va.gov/products/prep-patient-factsheets.asp>

Other Resources

- ▶ Ending the HIV Epidemic: Prevention resources including PrEP donation program and Syringe Services Program locator: <https://www.cdc.gov/endhiv/prevent.html>
- ▶ 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)
- ▶ How to protect yourself and others when using drugs: <http://harmreduction.org/our-resources/>