



## Myths about HIV/AIDS

Having correct information is the key to understanding and preventing HIV/AIDS. Here are some common myths about HIV/AIDS that are not true:

- Myth: HIV can be cured.

The truth is: There is no cure for HIV at this time. We've made great strides in HIV care, though. With today's medicine, people can reduce their viral load (amount of HIV in the blood) to the point that it is undetectable. Having an undetectable viral load helps prevent AIDS and other infections. Research is being done all the time that may lead to new treatments and new ways of preventing HIV infection. People who have HIV also have families and relationships that bring them great joy. Many people still work, despite their illness. In short, people are living full lives with HIV and AIDS, but there is no cure yet.

- Myth: I cannot get HIV from tattoos or body piercing.

It is possible to get HIV from tattoo and piercing tools that are not sterilized properly between clients. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that tools that cut the skin should be used once, then thrown away or sterilized between uses. Before you get a tattoo or have your body pierced, ask the right questions. Find out what steps the staff takes to prevent HIV and other infections, like hepatitis B and hepatitis C. You also can call your local health department to ask how tattoo shops should sterilize their tools. A new needle should be used for each person.

- Myth: If the man I'm with had HIV, I'd be able to tell.

It can take 10 years for symptoms of HIV to show up. This is called the latency period. There may be a long period of time where someone has HIV but has no signs. The only way to fully protect yourself from sexually-transmitted HIV is to not have sex of any kind. Using a male condom correctly and every time you have sex may reduce the risk of passing HIV by 80 percent.

- Myth: Since I am HIV-positive, if I get pregnant, I will spread the disease to my unborn baby.

A woman who knows about her HIV infection early in pregnancy and is treated has about a 2 percent chance of having a baby with HIV. Without treatment, this risk is about 25 percent in the United States. All pregnant women should be tested for HIV. A woman with HIV in the United States should not breastfeed her baby because that is another way to pass the virus. There are other ways to prevent HIV in your kids.

- Myth: Both my partner and I have HIV. We don't need to use a condom.

This is not true. You still need to practice safer sex. Keep in mind, there are different strains (types) of HIV. Even if you have HIV, you can be infected with a different type from what you already have. You could become infected with drug-resistant strains of HIV. This can make it very hard for treatment to work. Make sure to use a condom every time you have any kind of sex.

- Myth: I have HIV. I shouldn't start drug therapy until I get very sick.

Even when you're feeling great, HIV is making copies of itself and attacking your body. When you finally start feeling sick, HIV has already hurt your immune system. At that point, nothing can bring it fully back to normal. To protect your immune system, most experts think you should start HIV medicines before you become very ill. Because these drugs reduce your "viral load," or the amount of virus in your blood, they also reduce your chances of passing HIV to others. However, taking HIV treatment does not guarantee that you will not infect others. Regular checkups will help you and your doctor decide the best time for you to start treatment.



## Myths about HIV/AIDS (Continued 2)

- Myth: Women can't give men HIV.

It's much harder for men to get HIV from women, but it does happen. HIV does not live long outside the body. A man's penis is only exposed to HIV for the time that it is in a vagina or rectum. Men also may have fewer areas on the penis where the virus can enter the body. HIV can enter at the opening of the tip and through cuts or sores on the shaft. But if a partner has an untreated sexually transmitted infection (STI) like syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia, the risk is higher. These infections can bring more CD4 cells to the area of infection, or cause breaks in the skin, both increasing the risk of passing HIV. Meanwhile, women have a higher risk of getting HIV from men. Because HIV is in the man's semen, which can stay in the woman's vagina for days, her exposure time is longer after sex. Also, the vagina provides a much larger area than the penis does through which HIV can enter the woman's body.

- Myth: HIV is the same as AIDS.

HIV is the virus that leads to AIDS. A person is said to have AIDS when his or her CD4 count drops below 200 or when he or she has certain infections or cancers. A person can have HIV for years without having AIDS. Having HIV does not mean you have AIDS.

- Myth: Knowing who is on the "down low" will keep me from getting HIV.

The "down low" refers to men who have sex with both men and women, but do not call themselves gay or bisexual. These men also do not tell their female partners they are having sex with men. Learning your partner's sexual and drug history is important. But the only sure way to keep from getting HIV is to not have sex. Otherwise, make sure to use a condom every time you have sex. You and your partner should both get tested before ever having sex together. Even then, you should still use a condom to protect against STIs, including HIV, in case you or your partner has sex with someone else.

- Myth: The U.S. government produced AIDS to reduce the size of certain groups of people.

The government did not make this disease. Research suggests that AIDS appears to have started in Africa. Scientists found a type of chimpanzee in West Africa that may be the source of HIV infection and AIDS in humans. Mutations, or changes, in a single gene in HIV that infected the chimpanzee may have turned what was a fairly harmless infection in monkeys into a global killer of humans. The virus in humans appears to have lost a genetic trait that protected the immune system in monkeys and chimpanzees.

For more information on myths about HIV/AIDS, explore other publications and websites:

- AIDS Myths and Misunderstandings (Copyright © AIDS InfoNet) — AIDS InfoNet provides statistics and facts to dispel myths about the cause, transmission, and treatment of HIV/AIDS.  
[http://www.aidsinfonet.org/fact\\_sheets/view/158](http://www.aidsinfonet.org/fact_sheets/view/158)

- Tips For Teens: The Truth About HIV/AIDS — This publication for teens explains how HIV is spread, how to prevent HIV infection, and how to recognize symptoms of HIV. It offers tips for teens wanting to learn more about the disease, as well as for teens infected with HIV.