

# Common questions...

## ALL ABOUT HIV



HIV is a virus that affects the immune system and if not treated can lead to AIDS. HIV transmission can be prevented, and the HIV virus is treatable so it's good to know how you can protect yourself and others.

There are many myths around HIV that have led to stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV. People living with HIV can live long and healthy lives with the right treatment and support, and learning more about HIV can help you challenge the inaccurate information about HIV.



All the questions in this Q&A are based on frequent examples received from young people through UNICEF digital platforms, social listening reports and loGT analytics. The answers were developed in collaboration with a reference group of young people from the ESAR region and reviewed by technical staff from UNICEF, UNFPA and UNAIDS.

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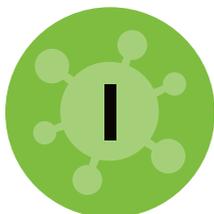
What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?



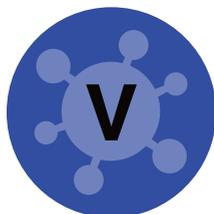
HIV and AIDS are different. HIV is a virus that can lead to AIDS if not treated. HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It's a virus that attacks the body's immune system, making it harder to fight off infections.



**Human**

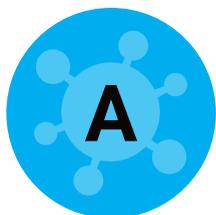


**Immunodeficiency**

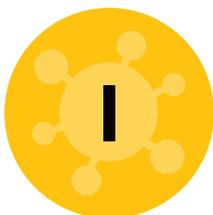


**Virus**

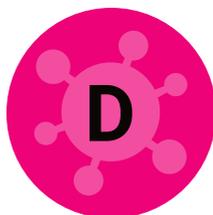
AIDS is short for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is a set of symptoms or illnesses caused by HIV.



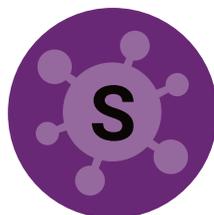
**Acquired**



**Immune**



**Deficiency**



**Syndrome**

Someone has AIDS when HIV infection is very advanced and, if it is not treated, it can lead to death. Now that many more people are on HIV treatment, fewer people die from AIDS.



# 2

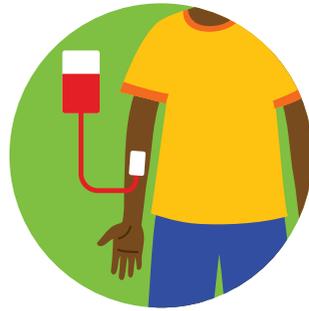
## How do you get HIV?



You can only get HIV if you come into contact with the blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breastmilk of someone who has the virus. The most common way to get HIV is through unprotected sex (sex without using a condom).



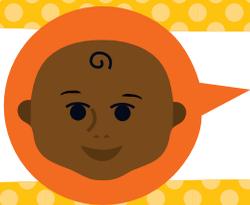
Sex without using a condom



Contaminated blood



You can also get HIV by sharing injecting equipment with someone who has HIV – such as needles, syringes and other equipment used to prepare and inject drugs.



A pregnant woman can also pass HIV to her baby, through her blood, during pregnancy or childbirth, or through her breast milk when breastfeeding.

If someone is taking antiretroviral treatment for HIV this will control the virus and reduce the risk of them passing the virus to sexual partners or from a mother to her child. You can't 'catch' HIV, like you can catch a cold.

The only way to know if you have HIV is by getting an HIV test. You can't tell just by looking at someone whether or not they have HIV. Many people with HIV don't have any symptoms, especially if they are on treatment.



Read more in the Q&A  
**Living with HIV.**

# 3

## How can you prevent HIV transmission?



There are lots of things that you can do to prevent HIV transmission:



Use **condoms** every time you have sex. Both male and female condoms (also called 'femidoms') will protect you from getting HIV and STIs as well as preventing pregnancy.



If you use drugs, **avoid sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment.**



If you are a pregnant woman living with HIV, **taking HIV treatment (called anti-retroviral treatment – ART) dramatically reduces your risk of passing HIV to your baby** during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.



If you or your partner is living with HIV, **taking effective HIV treatment** can reduce the amount of HIV in the blood (your 'viral load') to such low levels that it can't be detected in a blood test. If HIV is undetectable, this means that it cannot be passed on.



In some places, **pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)** is available. PrEP is a course of antiretroviral medication that can be taken by people who do not have HIV, but who are at higher risk of getting it.



**Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)** is available in most places. It is taken **after** possible exposure to HIV to prevent the risk of infection – for example, after unprotected sex, or in cases of rape. PEP is a 4-week course of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs and must be started within 72 hours of possible exposure to HIV to be effective.

Remember you can't get HIV from mosquitoes, from sharing items with people living with HIV, hugging or touching, kissing or bathing.



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Is it possible to get HIV the first time you have sex?



Yes, it is!



If you have sex without using a condom (unprotected sex) then you are at risk of HIV.



If your partner has HIV, and has not been taking ART, or the treatment has not been working and they have a detectable viral load, they can pass HIV on to you, even if it is your first-time having sex.



That is why it's important to use condoms correctly and consistently – every time you have sex – to reduce the risk of HIV transmission as well as prevent pregnancy and STIs.



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Is there a  
cure for  
HIV?



There is no cure for HIV yet, but anti-retroviral treatment (ART) that's available now means that HIV can be controlled, and the amount of virus in the blood reduced to very low levels (called an 'undetectable viral load').



This means that people living with HIV can have healthy and fulfilling lives, just like anyone else, by taking daily medication, and they can live without the fear of passing HIV to others, including their babies.



**There are lots of dangerous myths about cures for HIV. Having sex with a virgin will NOT cure HIV, nor will herbal remedies and 'alternative' medicines or spiritual cleansing.**

Starting ART early helps people living with HIV to stay healthy, that's why it's so important to get tested for HIV and know your HIV status.



# 6

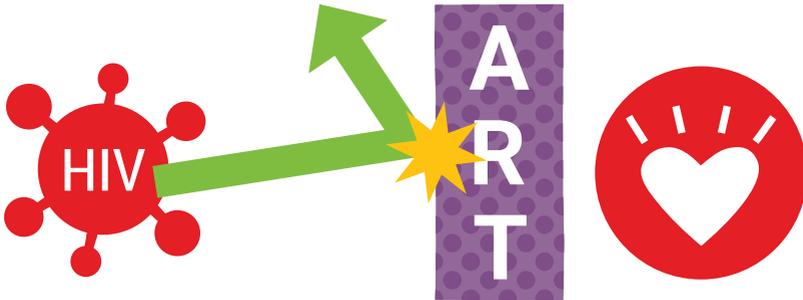
## What treatment is available for HIV and how does it work?



There's now very good treatment for HIV, and people living with HIV on treatment can live long and healthy lives, just like anybody else. HIV is treated using anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs), also called antiretroviral therapy (ART).



ARVs work by preventing HIV from infecting new cells in the body's immune system and reducing the amount of HIV in someone's body (viral load) to very low levels. ARV's allow the immune system to strengthen and fight infections effectively.



Starting ART as soon as possible after becoming infected with HIV helps people to stay healthy. This is why HIV testing is so important; so that people can know their HIV status and start treatment early if they test positive.



# 7

## What are PrEP and PEP and what's the difference?



### PrEP

**PrEP** stands for **Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis** and is a course of HIV drugs that can be taken before sex by those most at risk of HIV - including adolescent girls, people who sell sex, and men who have sex with men – to prevent HIV being passed on.

### PEP

**PEP** stands for **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis** and is a 4-week course of ARV drugs taken after possible HIV exposure – eg, after unprotected sex or rape – to prevent HIV infection. You must start PEP within 72 hours of possible exposure to be effective.

In some places PEP and PrEP are hard to find, or only available in certain situations. If you want to know more, ask at a clinic or look up HIV services in your area. Remember it is still important to use condoms to reduce the risk of STIs and pregnancy.



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I've heard that people living with HIV who are taking treatment can't pass on the virus, is it true?



It is true as long as they take their HIV treatment properly and tests show that they have very low levels of HIV in their body (undetectable viral load). If someone is taking their medicine regularly, and it is working well, then it can control HIV and it can't be detected in their body when they have something called a 'viral load' test. This test has to be done regularly by a health worker. If a person has an 'undetectable' viral load it means they can't pass on HIV.



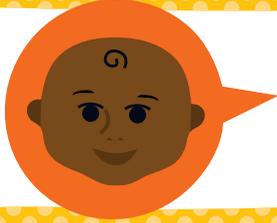
Being 'undetectable' does not mean that HIV is cured. HIV is still present in the body, but the amount of virus in the blood (viral load) has been reduced to a very low level. This means that if the person with HIV stopped taking treatment, their viral load would go up again, and they would be able to pass on HIV. To know if your viral load is undetectable, you must have it monitored regularly.

An undetectable viral load means HIV is 'untransmittable' – it can't be passed on. [Read more in the Q&A on Living with HIV.](#)

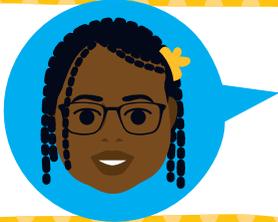


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## How can a woman living with HIV give birth to an HIV negative baby?



An HIV positive mother can pass on the virus to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth and through breastfeeding. But, by taking anti-retroviral treatment (ART) while she is pregnant and breastfeeding, she can almost eliminate the risk of passing on the virus to the baby.



It is important that women living with HIV access care early in their pregnancy to make sure they are on the right ART and it is working well. Babies born to women living with HIV are also given treatment for four to six weeks, and they will also be tested for HIV.



Even if the results are negative, it is important the baby comes back for additional tests as instructed by the health provider.

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I'm worried I might have HIV, what should I do?



The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested. Getting an HIV test is quick, easy and almost always free, and you can check online for services near you. Depending on the type of test used, you will be asked to give a small sample of blood or saliva, and you will get the results within a few minutes or a few days.

In some places you can do your own test at home but you should always talk to someone about doing a self-test and make sure you have a follow-up test done in a clinic to confirm the result.



In each country there will be an age limit for a test. You will need parental permission if you are below the age limit. If you can't get parental permission or if you have any questions, talk to your health care worker to see what the options are.

It's normal to feel nervous before getting an HIV test. But knowing your HIV status can put your mind at rest and, if you test positive, it means you can start treatment early to stay healthy. If you're having sex, it's good to get into the habit of testing regularly for HIV, even if you use condoms and don't think you have been at risk.

Remember that your results are confidential so no one will know unless you decide to tell them.



HIV testing is still happening even during COVID-19 so get that test!

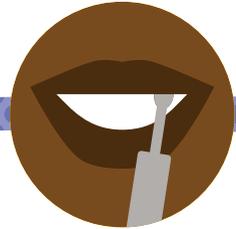
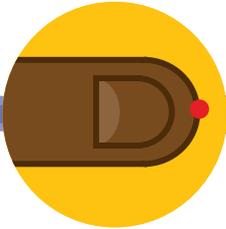


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## How long does it take to get the results from an HIV test?



Usually, you will get your HIV test results within a few days, but it may be quicker, depending on the type of test. Normally an HIV test involves taking a small amount of blood from your finger or arm, or a saliva sample from your mouth.



If you're taking a rapid test, you will be given your results within 20 minutes, but you will need to do a follow up test to check the result. Other types of tests will be sent to a lab, and it may take a few days to get the result.

Although HIV tests are very reliable, you should be asked to have a second test to double check your result if your test comes back positive. If your second test is also positive, you will get an HIV diagnosis and will be supported to start treatment.

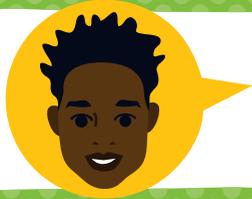


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**My partner is refusing to test for HIV, how can I persuade them?**



It's good to get into the habit of testing for HIV regularly. But it's important to remember that deciding to have an HIV test is a personal choice, and nobody should feel pressurised by others to take one.



If you've had an HIV test yourself, you can explain the process to your partner and discuss their worries. You can explain that it's normal to feel nervous, but that testing for HIV can help to put their mind at rest.

Testing for HIV regularly, and knowing your HIV status, means that you can look after your health and your partner's health. You can also explain that if someone does test positive for HIV, they can start HIV treatment early, which will help them live a long and healthy life.

You could offer to support them by going with them for the test.



## Further information and contact details

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