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## **HIV Symptoms**

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Image



Image courtesy of Bridgette Picou

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Welcome! What answers are you looking for about HIV symptoms?

- [What are some basic things to know about HIV and the body?](#)
- [I think I may have been exposed to HIV.](#)
- [I want to know if the symptoms I am having mean that I have HIV.](#)
- [I just learned that I have HIV and I want to know what to expect.](#)

## What are some basic things to know about HIV and the body?

HIV (which stands for human immunodeficiency virus) is a chronic health condition. At the moment, no [cure](#) is available for HIV, though researchers are working on that. What we do have available, right now, are many [treatments](#) that are extremely good at keeping HIV under control in people's bodies. They are easy to take, with few or no [side effects](#). These medications are helping millions of people with HIV live as long and as fully as if they did not have HIV (sometimes more so, because for many people living with HIV, their diagnosis is an opportunity to take charge of their health). If their HIV treatment is working well, then the [chance is zero that they can pass on HIV during sex](#).

## Acute HIV

The **only** way to know whether you have acquired HIV is to **get tested for HIV**.

When HIV enters the body, it infects the person's immune cells and begins to weaken their [immune system](#). During this early ("acute") stage of HIV, a person may have symptoms similar to the flu, such as fever, a sore throat, muscle aches, extreme tiredness (fatigue), swollen glands (e.g., under arms), headaches, or night sweats. However, some people do not develop any symptoms at all. Others may think they just have a bad cold. After these symptoms disappear, people living with HIV can go for years without showing any symptoms.

During the acute stage, the body is making *antibodies* to fight the virus. Antibodies are proteins that your body makes to mark HIV for destruction by your immune system. The body takes one to three months and occasionally up to six months to develop these antibodies. This period between acquiring HIV and the production of antibodies is called the "window period." This means that most widely available HIV tests, which detect antibodies, are only reliable after a person has been living with HIV for one to three months.

An HIV test can be an important part of **taking care of your sexual and reproductive health**, and of **caring** for your partner(s).

*The only way to know whether you have acquired HIV is to [get tested](#).* If you think you may have been exposed to HIV (and there are only a few [specific ways this can occur](#) – see below) and it was less than three months ago, it is important that the test you take be designed to look for HIV *antigens* (not just HIV antibodies) in this early stage. Antigens are pieces of HIV, or viral particles. If an HIV antigen is in your blood, tests can identify HIV acquisition as soon as two weeks after you have been exposed to the virus. If it has been longer than three months since your possible contact with HIV, then an antibody test is a reliable way to know whether or not you are living with HIV. When you go to get tested for HIV, you can ask which type of test fits your situation.

### To review:

- An HIV antigen test can tell you within three months of possible exposure if you have acquired HIV
- An HIV antibody test is reliable if it has been longer than three months since your possible HIV exposure
- *An HIV test is the only reliable way to find out if you are living with HIV*

## Advanced HIV

If a person did not get tested before their immune system weakened further and has not been taking HIV medications, after many years their body will no longer be able to fend off other viruses and bacteria. This process can cause people to get otherwise uncommon infections (called [opportunistic infections](#)) and/or lose fat in their cheeks and other parts of their body ("wasting"). At that point, their HIV has progressed to an advanced stage called AIDS.

*Getting tested and starting treatment with HIV medications (and possibly other medications) can reverse this process.* Taking HIV drugs as prescribed can help someone continue living with chronic HIV. With the right treatment, people can live well with HIV for as long as people who do not live with HIV. Without any treatment, however, the body will eventually be unable to defend itself against opportunistic infections, leading to severe illness and, in most cases, death.

## HIV Stigma

There are only a few ways in which people can acquire HIV (more on this below). Many of the ways people acquire HIV (sex, injecting drugs) are things that can be difficult to talk about, and that people may be made to believe they ought to feel ashamed about. Because of this, and because HIV rates are higher among people who are already marginalized and overlooked (cisgender and transgender women; gay and bisexual men; Black, Latinx, and indigenous people; people living in poverty), living with the virus is often stigmatized. Stigma is a huge reason why people avoid getting tested for HIV, even though it is a health condition like any other that humans get. An HIV test can be an important part of taking care of your sexual and reproductive health, and of caring for your partner(s). *Getting tested is also the only way to know if you are living with HIV.*

HIV stigma and assumptions also keep health care providers from offering an HIV test to everyone who may benefit from such a test. For instance, in the US, HIV testing is recommended for all adults under 65 years old, but many adults have never been tested.

## HIV Testing and Pregnancy

Among the few groups of people who are virtually always tested for HIV are pregnant people. Unfortunately, many women receive their HIV diagnosis during pregnancy. Their health care provider may not have offered them an HIV test, or the woman may not have believed she needed one, because of misconceptions about HIV risk. Although pregnancy may be a hard time to find out that you are living with HIV, most of the HIV medications now available are safe to take during pregnancy. With treatment, women and other birthing parents living with HIV can have healthy [pregnancies and births](#), and the chance that their babies will acquire HIV is less than 1 percent.

*Getting tested is the only way to find out if you are living with HIV.* While testing can feel intimidating or scary, if you do test positive for the virus, you can get the treatment you need to thrive with HIV.

Read more: [What Are HIV & AIDS?](#)

Read more: [Pregnancy, Birth, and HIV](#)

Read more: [HIV Stigma and Discrimination](#)

## I think I may have been exposed to HIV.

Even if your partner is living with HIV, that **does not necessarily mean you have been exposed** to HIV.

Only six bodily fluids can transmit HIV:

- Blood
- Anal secretions
- Vaginal secretions
- Semen ("cum")
- Pre-seminal secretions (pre-cum)
- Breast milk

You *cannot* acquire HIV from any other fluids. HIV **is not spread** through contact with these bodily fluids:

- Sweat
- Tears
- Saliva (spit)
- Feces (poop)

- Urine (pee)

*The only ways a person can acquire HIV are:*

- Re-using and sharing needles or other [equipment for injecting drugs](#), steroids or hormones)
- Unprotected/unsafe sex, which means:
  - sex without using [condoms](#) or other barriers, such as dental dams
  - sex when an HIV-negative partner is not taking pre-exposure prophylaxis ([PrEP](#)) as prevention (see below for more information on staying HIV-negative by taking PrEP)
  - sex when a partner living with HIV is not taking HIV drugs and/or has a detectable [viral load](#) (amount of HIV in their blood), and none of the prevention tools above are used
  - while both partners can acquire HIV, a receptive partner in vaginal or anal sex is more vulnerable to HIV (when prevention tools are not used)
- Perinatal or mother-to-child during [pregnancy](#), birth, or [breastfeeding](#) (chance of transmitting HIV from a birthing parent to a baby can be as low as 1 percent if the parent takes HIV drugs and has a very low viral load during pregnancy and breastfeeding)
- Getting a tattoo, piercing or acupuncture with unsterile needles. This may happen when such procedures are not available through regular channels – e.g., [in prison or jail](#)
- *In extremely rare cases* from receiving a transfusion of blood that has not been tested for HIV. In North America, Europe and many other countries, donated blood is tested for HIV and other viruses.

## When and Where to Get an HIV Test

If you have had sex without condoms or barriers, or shared injection equipment without prevention methods such as clean needles, and you don't know your partner's HIV status (or you don't know their viral load, if they are living with HIV), it's a good idea to [get tested for HIV](#), even if you have had no symptoms.

With the right treatment, **people can live well with HIV** for as long as people who do not live with HIV.

Again, it can take as long as three months for a person to produce enough antibodies to be detected by standard HIV tests. This means that if you have a negative HIV test sooner than three months after you think you may have been exposed, it is a good idea to get tested again after that three month-period has elapsed. If you test positive for HIV at any time, you will need a second test to confirm the results.

You can get tested at a health care provider's office, an HIV or other health clinic, a health department or sometimes at a mobile testing center or during an outreach event. At-home test kits, which you can order online, are also available. In the US, you can go to the [National HIV and STD Testing Resources website](#) or the [HIV.gov website](#) to find a testing site near you. You can also call the CDC's information line at 800-232-4636 (TTY: 800-232-4636) or your state's HIV/AIDS hotline to learn where to get tested for HIV.

If you have certain symptoms (see below) and have had sex without barriers, or injected drugs or other substances, in the past few weeks, you may want to get tested for HIV. Just like having a cough could mean that you have COVID-19 but could also mean that you have a cold or an allergic reaction, having one or more of the symptoms below does not necessarily mean that you have acquired HIV. *Only an HIV test can tell.*

Some symptoms of a recent (acute) HIV infection include:

- Fever
- Swollen glands
- Sore throat



- Night sweats
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Rash

Again, there is no other way to know if you have acquired HIV other than getting tested. Even if your partner is living with HIV, that does not necessarily mean you have been exposed to HIV. If your partner is on effective HIV treatment and their viral load is undetectable (very low by standard blood tests), they cannot transmit HIV to you during sex. See our fact sheet on [U=U \(Undetectable = Untransmittable\)](#) for more information.

Even if a recent partner tells you they tested negative, you may still have acquired HIV from another partner. **Your HIV test result, not someone else's, is the only way to know your HIV status.**

Other [sexually transmitted infections](#) (STIs), such as [chlamydia](#) or [gonorrhea](#), can also be transmitted during sex without a condom or other barrier. Some STIs have no symptoms but can cause problems later on. These infections can be passed on even without symptoms. If you think you may have been exposed to HIV, it is therefore a good idea to also get tested for other STIs.

## Testing Negative and Preventing HIV

If you test negative for HIV outside of the window period, or with an antigen test, this means that you are not living with HIV. If you are concerned about being able to continue preventing HIV during sex, you can consider taking PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis). PrEP means that people who do not have HIV take an HIV medication (as a daily pill; an injection taken every two months is also available) to lower their chance of acquiring HIV if they are exposed to the virus. PrEP medications are extremely effective at keeping people HIV-negative when they are taken as prescribed. For more information, please see our fact sheet on [PrEP for Women](#).

**If you have not had sex or shared a needle to inject drugs, hormones, or other substances, you cannot acquire HIV.** If you are having symptoms, then they are definitely not from acute or advanced HIV. If you are still worried, you can get tested for HIV – then you have proof that you are not living with the virus.

Read more: [HIV Transmission](#)

Read more: [Safer Sex](#)

Read more: [HIV Testing](#)

## I want to know if the symptoms I am having mean that I have HIV.

If you have not had sex without condoms or other barriers and you have not shared equipment to inject drugs or other substances, **HIV cannot have entered your body.** Whatever symptoms you have therefore cannot have been caused by HIV.

If you have had sex or shared injection equipment, you cannot figure out from an Internet search whether you are living with HIV. Any symptoms you have could have a variety of causes, only one of which is HIV. For example, a sore throat could be caused by the streptococcus bacterium (“strep throat”), the SARS-CoV-2 virus (which causes COVID-19), the common cold, influenza (“flu”), an allergic reaction, [smoking](#), or something else. *The only way to know whether you have acquired HIV is to [get tested for HIV](#).*

# I just learned that I have HIV and I want to know what to expect.

It is possible to **manage** this chronic condition, and **your life can be full and healthy**.

You are not alone! [Finding out you are living with HIV](#) can be life-changing news. **While you may feel angry or confused, know that if you take HIV medications, you can live just as long as people who do not have HIV.**

It may be helpful to talk to other people who are also living with HIV. AIDS service organizations (ASOs) in your area may have (possibly virtual) support groups. If you prefer more private conversations, these organizations may be able to connect you to someone to talk to. [Click here](#) to find an ASO in the US. The Well Project's [A Girl Like Me](#) blog offers a community of women [across the gender spectrum](#) living with HIV who write personal accounts and about how they have handled their diagnosis, as well as their lives and relationships.

Try not to rush into decisions as you figure out what to do next. The first step is to find a good health care provider who is familiar with HIV. An ASO may be able to help you find such a person and may also be able to help you get coverage if you do not have health insurance. If you need help getting HIV care and treatment in the US, [check here](#) to find a medical provider funded through the Ryan White program, which does not ask about immigration status.

You do not need to tell ([disclose](#) to) everyone that you are living with HIV. However, it's important to tell your sexual partners – including ex-partners since the time you acquired HIV – or people with whom you shared injection equipment, so they can get tested for HIV. Your local health department or ASO may be able to notify these people on your behalf.

If you want to be involved in a larger community, you have come to the right place – you are very welcome to [join our online community](#). If you prefer to learn more about HIV in private, you have also come to the right place – browse [our fact sheet library](#).

It is possible to manage this chronic condition, and your life can be full and healthy. You can find support and connection, including among other women living with HIV. *Do not give up on yourself or your dreams.*

Read more: [Did You Just Test HIV-Positive?](#)

Read more: [Starting HIV Treatment](#)

Read more: [Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma](#)

Read more: [Serodifferent Partners: Dating, Relationships, and Mixed HIV Status](#)

## Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to HIV symptoms.

- [HIV Symptoms \(BelInTheKnow\)](#)
- [HIV/AIDS \(Mayo Clinic\)](#)
- [What Are the Symptoms of HIV & AIDS? \(Planned Parenthood\)](#)
- [A Timeline of HIV Symptoms \(Healthline; includes video\)](#)
- [Put an End to Your Fears, Stop Googling and Go Get Tested \(TheBody\)](#)
- [About HIV \(US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention\)](#)
- [Symptoms of HIV \(HIV.gov\)](#)

- [Symptoms of HIV \(Terrence Higgins Trust, UK\)](#)
- [What Are Common Symptoms of HIV? \(US National Institutes of Health\)](#)
- [HIV Symptoms: Stages of HIV and Related Symptoms \(verywellHealth\)](#)



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