

# HIV/AIDS

## *The Health Column*

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It is estimated that approximately 35 million people worldwide are living with HIV, and of these about 3.2 million are children.

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus and it causes the disease AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). It is one of the world's most serious health problems. HIV weakens the body's immune system which is our defence against disease. Once our immune system is weakened, serious infections and cancers can develop in our bodies, which is how AIDS occurs. AIDS has killed millions of people around the world.



Anyone can get the HIV virus – it does not discriminate between age, race, gender or sexual orientation. Once infected with HIV, it may take several years for someone to develop AIDS.

HIV is spread if bodily fluids from an infected person enter the blood stream of another person. The virus is most commonly spread by sexual intercourse where condoms are not used, and through sharing of needles, syringes and other injecting equipment. Safe sex practices such as using condoms during vaginal and anal sex greatly reduces the risk of infection.

In Australia spreading of the virus by mother to baby during pregnancy, or by use of blood products and medical equipment is rare.

HIV cannot be transferred by hugging or shaking hands with someone, or by sharing items around the house such as toilets, swimming pools etc. The virus cannot survive for long outside the body and ordinary household bleach or soap and warm water can kill it.

Someone who has first been infected with the HIV virus may get symptoms like constantly feeling tired, develop a skin rash or get flu-like symptoms such as fever, headaches and swollen glands. A blood test can detect antibodies to HIV. Early testing can help with diagnosis, starting of treatment and help to prevent the spread of infection. Sometimes the virus may take up to three months to show up but your doctor will do a test first and recommend another one later. If someone suspects they have contracted HIV, they should not donate blood and use safe sex practices.

Although medicines cannot get rid of HIV, they can help a person stay healthier for longer. Medicines can help reduce AIDS-related illnesses, hospital admissions and also help people to return to work. Treatment with medicines does not prevent the infected person from transmitting the virus, so they must still be cautious about not spreading it.

If a person thinks they have been infected with HIV by someone, they should contact their doctor or a HIV/AIDS or Sexual Health Clinic as soon as possible. There are post exposure medicines that may be considered by the doctor to help stop the virus taking hold. However these must be started no later than 72 hours after exposure.

The 1st of December is World AIDS Day. It aims to encourage everyone to become aware of HIV and the issues surrounding AIDS. It also aims to ensure that those living with HIV can be free from stigma and discrimination and fully take part in their community. It is a day for all to show support for those living with HIV and to remember those who have died.

You can find more information and advice about HIV and its prevention from your local pharmacy. Self Care Fact Cards on HIV/AIDS are available from those pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.