

Understanding HIV Infection and AIDS

What is HIV?

HIV is a virus (Human Immuno-deficiency Virus) that attacks the human immune system, the body's defence against disease – that is, the body's ability to fight infection off. If the defence system is damaged in this way, certain infections which one would normally shake off can become very serious.

Being HIV-antibody positive means that the person has been infected with HIV and that the body has made antibodies to it. Antibodies are made by the body's defence system in response to infection. Most types of antibodies help to fight infections. In the case of HIV, they do not.

Over 50% of HIV positive people may develop particular rare illnesses or cancers within 10 years, because their immune system is weakened. When this happens, the person is said to have AIDS.

What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is only diagnosed if one develops specific infections and/or cancers. The virus works by slowly destroying the body's immune system until it is left without any defence mechanism to protect itself against infections and different forms of cancer.

When the immune system is completely destroyed, the body is open to all sorts of infections which are to a certain extent treatable. With every infection, the body becomes weaker and weaker until in the end the person dies.

Currently the picture is not so bleak. Nowadays a person with HIV can receive treatment which can delay the onset of AIDS.

The effects of HIV infection

Initially, when a person is infected with the HIV virus, there are no signs whatsoever that something is wrong. In some cases, on infection, the person develops symptoms similar to influenza from which the person recovers spontaneously. This period of apparent "good health" can last up to 10 years and in this period the infected person will still lead a normal life. **But the person can still pass on the virus.**

Unfortunately the first signs of infection are when the person develops AIDS. This happens when the immune system has sustained considerable damage. The following are other ways in which HIV can affect a person's health:

- Feeling generally unwell, tired or exhausted
- Weight loss for no obvious reason
- Diarrhoea
- Fevers and night sweats
- Skin problems
- Mouth infections

How can people become infected with HIV?

In order for a person to become infected, the body fluids of a person infected with HIV or AIDS need to come in contact and enter the bloodstream of an uninfected person.

The body fluids we are referring to include:

- Blood
- Sperm and seminal fluid
- Vaginal fluids, including menstrual blood
- Breast milk

Other body fluids like saliva, sweat or urine do not contain enough virus cells to infect another person.

If HIV is present in body fluids, it still cannot enter another person's body easily. There are a limited number of routes:

- Directly into the bloodstream; for example via a puncture caused by injecting equipment
- Via an organ transplant or blood transfusion (not a risk in Malta since donated blood is monitored)
- Through the 'interior' skin (mucus membrane) of the rectum, vagina, cervix and urethra. The urethra is in the front of the vagina in women and is the 'tube' in the penis in men
- From mother to child during pregnancy

You cannot become infected by:

HIV cannot pass through intact external skin. It cannot pass through the air like cold germs, and cannot be passed on through:

- Touching, shaking hands or hugging someone
- Kissing
- From sharing cups, plates, knives and forks
- Using the same toilet or bath
- Sharing towels and clothes
- Food
- Coughing and sneezing
- Sea or swimming pools
- Mosquitoes or other insects
- Working with someone who is HIV positive
- Children playing with other children who are HIV positive
- Going to schools with children who are HIV positive
- Donating blood

Therefore coming into contact with someone with HIV is perfectly safe.

How can I protect myself from the virus?

By following some basic rules, one can diminish the risks of contracting HIV.

- Have a monogamous relationship with your partner. Remember that the more partners you come in contact with, the higher the risk of being exposed to the virus.
- Have only protected sex. By using protection every time you have a sexual contact, you will greatly lower the risk of being infected with HIV or other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD).
- Try not to cloud your judgements with alcohol or other drugs. These may lead you and your partner to practice less safer sex.
- Do not borrow used injecting equipment as other serious infections can be passed on to you apart from HIV.

Can I notice that person has HIV?

No, there are no ways one can notice whether a person is infected. For several years after being infected the person can feel absolutely healthy and lead a normal life. It is highly probable that the person would not even know that he/she is infected with the virus. The only way to find out would be to take an HIV test.

What is an HIV test?

HIV is usually diagnosed by a blood test, known as an HIV antibody test or an HIV test. This test looks for antibodies formed by the immune system if HIV is present.

If HIV antibodies are found, the test is referred to as positive. The person who is HIV antibody positive is referred to as HIV-positive. If antibodies are not found, the test is negative and the person is HIV antibody negative or HIV-negative.

There is a gap, or 'window period', between infection and the formation of antibodies. This can last from a few weeks to three months. During this window period, the HIV antibody test will be negative even if HIV is present. That is why people who think they may be infected need to wait for at least three months before they have a test. It is important to note that if one is found to be positive soon after injection, there is treatment available which has been proven to delay the onset of AIDS.

If after having read this you think that you have indulged in risky behaviour, the best thing to do is to have a test.

Where to go for testing:

- Your GP
- Health Centres
- Private clinics
- 'Servizz XEFAQ' offers a free counselling service and could be followed by anonymous testing. This is a service provided by Caritas Malta and can be contacted on 21245358 / 21 233933
- GU Clinic – Health Promotion Department, which can be contacted on 21227981

Living with HIV

Research has shown that although a person is HIV positive, the person can do a lot to improve and look after his/her own health:

- Don't ignore the symptoms. Go and see your doctor.
- Get enough rest.
- Reduce unnecessary stress.
- Keep as fit as you can but don't wear yourself out.
- Eat good, nourishing meals with lots of fresh vegetables and fruit.
- Never drink untreated water.
- Moderate your alcohol intake.
- If you smoke, try to stop smoking or cut down.

Going abroad?

It is very important to understand that there is no country free from HIV, so take all the pre-cautionary measures that you have read about.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

A person with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) is at a higher risk to get infected with HIV. If you think you have any sexual disease, go and seek help and treatment through your general practitioner or any other doctor.