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HIV, AIDS, and Older People

Grace's Story

Grace was dating again. She and George, a family friend she had known for years, became quite close and their relationship became sexual. Because she wasn't worried about getting pregnant, Grace didn't think about using condoms. And, because she had known George for so long, she didn't think to ask him about his sexual history. So, Grace was shocked when she tested positive for HIV.

Like most people, you probably have heard a lot about HIV and AIDS. You may have thought that these diseases aren't your problem and that only younger people have to worry about them. But, anyone at any age can be infected with HIV.

What Is HIV? What Is AIDS?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that damages and weakens the body's immune system—the system your body uses to fight off infection and disease. Having HIV puts a person in danger of experiencing other life-threatening infections and certain cancers.

When the body cannot fight off infections and some other diseases anymore, HIV can lead to a serious illness called AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). When someone has AIDS, they are more likely to get infections, and more vulnerable to unusual forms of cancers and other serious diseases. But, with early and uninterrupted treatment, it is possible that a person with HIV will never develop AIDS.

If you think you may have HIV, you should get tested. Everyone age 13 to 64 should be tested at least once for HIV. If you are over 64 and are at risk for HIV, talk with your doctor. Your doctor can help determine how often you should be tested and help find ways to reduce your risk.

There are drugs that, when taken consistently, can help suppress the amount of HIV in your blood to undetectable levels, improving your health overall and making it harder to pass HIV on to your sexual partners. To get the best results, it is important to start treatment as soon as possible. If you are unsure about your HIV status, get tested. Always protect yourself and your partners when having sex or using needles.

How Do I Get Tested for HIV?

A small blood sample, mouth swab, or urine sample is used to test people for HIV. It can take as long as 3 to 6 months after initial exposure for the signs of the virus to show up in your blood, and years before you show any symptoms.

You can be tested at a doctor's office, hospital, community health center, or other health clinic. Some places have mobile testing vans. AIDS services organizations also may provide testing. At-home testing kits are also available.

Depending on where you go, testing may be free. You may be able to choose to take the test without giving your name. Many providers or groups that offer HIV testing also provide counseling.

If you choose to take a test at home, make sure to use a [test that has been approved](#) by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). If the test has not been approved by the FDA, it may not give accurate results. Home tests are sold at drugstores and online. Follow up with your doctor to confirm the results of at-home tests and, if necessary, begin treatment.

Finding a Place to Get Tested for HIV

Your doctor or other healthcare provider can test you for HIV or tell you where you can get tested. Or, the following resources can help you find a testing location:

- [HIV Testing and Care Locator](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), or call 1-800-232-4636 (toll-free).
- [Your local health department](#)

Drugstores also sell home testing kits (such as the Home Access™ HIV-1 Test System or the OraQuick® In-Home HIV Test).

How Is HIV Transmitted?

Anyone, at any age, can get HIV. People usually acquire HIV from unprotected sex with someone living with HIV, through contact with HIV-infected blood, or by sharing needles with a person living with HIV. You may be at risk if:

- You had sex without a latex or polyurethane condom. The virus passes from the person living with HIV to his or her partner via blood, semen, or vaginal fluid. During sex, HIV can get into your body through body fluids and any opening, such as a tear or cut in the lining of the vagina, vulva, penis, rectum, or—rarely—the mouth. Latex condoms can help prevent HIV transmission between sexual partners. (Natural condoms, like condoms made from lambskin, are not as effective as latex and polyurethane condoms at protecting against HIV/AIDS.)
- You or your sexual partners have shared needles with a person living with HIV. People who inject illegal drugs are not the only people who might share needles. For example, people with diabetes who inject insulin or draw blood to test glucose levels could also share needles. Talk to your partner(s) about their drug and sexual history, and always use a new, sterile needle for injections.
- You had a blood transfusion or operation in a developing country at any time.
- You had a blood transfusion in the United States between 1978 and 1985.
- You were diagnosed with or treated for hepatitis or tuberculosis (TB) at any time.

Talk to Your Partner(s) About Their Drug and Sexual History

Learning more about HIV risks can help you stay healthy. Even though it may be hard to do, ask your partner about his or her sexual history and whether he or she has ever shared needles. You might ask: *Have you been tested for HIV? Have you ever had unprotected sex? Have you injected drugs or shared needles with someone else?*

What Are the Symptoms of HIV?

Many people do not notice symptoms when they first acquire HIV. It can take as little as a few weeks for minor, flu-like symptoms to show up, or more than 10 years for more serious symptoms to appear, or any time in between. Signs of early HIV infection include flu-like symptoms such as headache, muscle aches, swollen glands, sore throat, fevers, chills, and sweating, and can also include a rash or mouth ulcers.

Symptoms of later-stage HIV or AIDS include swollen glands, lack of energy, loss of appetite, weight loss, chronic or recurrent diarrhea, repeated yeast infections, short-term memory loss, and blotchy lesions on the skin, inside the mouth, eyelids, nose, or genital area.

Is HIV/AIDS Different in Older People?

A growing number of older people are living with HIV/AIDS. One reason is because improved treatments are helping people with the disease live longer. Nearly half of people living with HIV in the United States are age 50 and older. Many of them were diagnosed with HIV in their younger years. However, thousands of older people get HIV every year.

Older people are less likely than younger people to get tested, so they may not know they have HIV. Signs of HIV/AIDS can be mistaken for the aches and pains of normal aging. Older adults might be coping with other diseases and the aches and pains of normal aging that can mask the signs of HIV/AIDS.

Some older people may feel ashamed or afraid of being tested. Plus, doctors do not always think to test older people for HIV. By the time the older person is diagnosed, the virus may be in the late stages and more likely to progress to AIDS.

Remember, if you are at risk, get tested regularly for HIV.

For people who have HIV, it is important to start treatment as soon as possible after diagnosis. Treatment can help reduce the level of HIV in the blood to undetectable levels. When treatment makes HIV undetectable, the possibility of spreading the virus to a sexual partner becomes very low. This is known as *treatment as prevention* (TasP).

Even when the disease is well controlled, people with HIV may develop aging-related conditions at a younger age. HIV and its treatment can also affect other parts of the body, such as the brain and the heart. For example, people living with HIV are significantly more likely to develop cardiovascular disease than people without HIV. Older people living with HIV also have an increased risk of dementia. Talk with your doctor if you are concerned about how living with HIV could affect you as you grow older.

Facts About HIV/AIDS

You may have read or heard things that are not true about how you get HIV. Here are the facts:

- You *cannot* get HIV through casual contact, such as shaking hands or hugging a person with HIV/AIDS.
- You *cannot* get HIV from using a public telephone, drinking fountain, restroom, swimming pool, whirlpool, or hot tub.
- You *cannot* get HIV from sharing a drink.
- You *cannot* get HIV from being coughed or sneezed on by a person with HIV/AIDS.
- You *cannot* get HIV from giving blood.
- You *cannot* get HIV from a mosquito bite.

Is There a Cure for HIV?

There is no cure for HIV. But if you acquire the virus, there are drugs that help suppress the level of HIV in the body and prevent its spread to other people. Doctors use a combination of drugs called HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) to treat HIV/AIDS. Although it is not a cure, HAART has greatly reduced the number of deaths from HIV-related complications in the United States. HIV has become like a chronic disease, and people living with HIV receiving successful treatment can live a long and healthy life.

Preventing HIV

Remember, there are things you can do to keep from getting or transmitting HIV. Take the following steps to lower your risk:

- If you are having sex, consider limiting your number of sexual partners. If you or your partner is having sex with other people, or if you don't know his or her sexual or drug history, always use protection. The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.
- Before having sex with someone, talk with them about HIV. Ask about their sexual and drug history. Get tested for sexually transmitted infections every year.
- Learn about the risks of different sexual activities and reduce your risk. (See the [CDC's HIV Risk Reduction Tool](#) for information about the risk associated with specific sexual behaviors.)

- Use male or female condoms (latex or polyurethane) during sexual intercourse.
- Do not share needles or any other equipment used to inject drugs. Always use new, sterile needles for injection.
- Get tested if you or your partner has had an operation or blood transfusion in a developing country at any time.
- Get tested if you or your partner had a blood transfusion between 1978 and 1985 in the United States.

If you are at very high risk for HIV infection through sex or injection drug use, you may prevent it by taking an anti-HIV medication daily, called pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. PrEP is effective at reducing the risk of acquiring HIV, but it must be taken every day. Talk with your doctor to find out whether PreP is right for you.

Read about [this topic in Spanish](#). Lea sobre [este tema en español](#).

For More Information About HIV/AIDS and Older People

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)

1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)

cdcinfo@cdc.gov

www.cdc.gov

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

1-866-284-4107 (toll-free)

1-800-877-8339 (TTY/toll-free)

ocpostoffice@niaid.nih.gov

www.niaid.nih.gov

Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders (SAGE)

1-212-741-2247

info@sageusa.org

www.sageusa.org

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