

Love without fear of AIDS



How to protect yourself against AIDS

Now that AIDS has made its appearance, love no longer simply represents something beautiful; it can also be dangerous. AIDS kills. Just one sexual encounter may be enough to pass it on. Currently you can protect yourself very reliably against infection without having to give up love and sex. So from now on, love without risk – for the love of life.

AIDS is the final stage of an infectious disease transmitted by HIV. Most infections with this virus occur through sexual transmission or the sharing of syringes.

In developed countries in the early eighties HIV was still thought to be confined to groups at risk, such as homosexuals and drug abusers. Today we know that the virus is spreading surreptitiously in the heterosexual population. This is why this leaflet is aimed mainly at young people.

How is HIV transmitted?

Once body fluid from an infected person and containing the AIDS virus (HIV) gets inside a healthy human organism, the virus can be transmitted to it. HIV can enter the body directly via the blood or through intact mucous membranes such as those in the vagina, the glans of the penis, the anus, the eyes, nose and mouth. HIV can also enter the body through skin wounds or irritations (eczema). The sperm, vaginal fluids and blood of infected persons contain large amounts of

virus. Small amounts have been detected in saliva, tears and urine (but not in sweat).

Risks of infection

You risk becoming infected with HIV only if you come into direct contact with body secretions of an infected person, for example in the following situations:

- Sexual activity: HIV is spread mostly through sexual intercourse but transmission cannot be completely ruled out during French kissing.
- Mother to baby: A mother infected with HIV can pass the virus on to her baby during pregnancy via the placenta, when giving birth or when breastfeeding.
- Use of non-sterile syringes.
- Use of non-sterile gloves, particularly in obstetrics and gynaecology.
- Blood transfusion, if the blood has not been tested and found seronegative.

What are the signs of HIV infection?

In the early years an infected person is hard to identify as seropositive and remains unaware of the infection. To diagnose HIV infection an HIV test is necessary. During any infectious illness the immune system produces antibodies to destroy invading organisms such as bacteria and viruses. From the first moment of HIV infection the virus manages

to «fool» the immune system. Antibodies take several weeks or even months to appear. It is now thought that most infected persons produce antibodies over a 3 month period. The antibodies are unable to eliminate the virus, but they show up in laboratory tests, thus providing proof that a person has become infected with HIV.

Safeguards against HIV infection

Nowadays any new sexual relationship carries a risk of infection with HIV, and so it is important to be meticulous in your choice of partner. Infection can only be ruled out if your partner is healthy. Obviously the more partners you have, the greater the risk of being infected.

Meticulous choice of partner

You must seek out a partner who is not infected and shares the ideal of love without risk. Before engaging in sexual activity with a person, you really have to know the person, as you do not know whether or not they are infected with HIV. Right from the start of the relationship, straight talking is needed. You should not only focus on past and present risks of infection; you also need to find out about your partner's habits, friends and family. The closeness achieved in this way enables you better to judge whether you can trust what your partner says. Only then can either of you know whether there has been an earlier risk of infection. If there has, an HIV test is essential. It naturally takes time for closeness, based on

mutual trust, to develop, but only on such a basis can sex be considered as a component part of a loving relationship, of partnership and of marriage.

Do not give HIV a chance, get tested!

It is therefore essential to be tested for HIV before embarking on a sexual relationship with a new partner. After infection it takes several months for antibodies to form. During this period a «false» negative result can ensue. For more certainty, the test must be repeated after three months of faithfulness or of complete abstinence.

Condoms

Using condoms reduces the risk of transmission of HIV, but does not rule it out entirely. People with little or no experience of using condoms sometimes use them incorrectly, which can be quite dangerous. Use only qualitycontrolled condoms and follow the user instructions meticulously.

Avoid consumption of alcohol and drugs

Consumption of alcohol and drugs impairs judgement and self-control in sexual relations, leading to indifference to oneself and others and to promiscuity. This is why users of drugs and alcohol are at particular risk of HIV infection. These substances also cause dependence and severe harm to physical and mental health. Alcohol damages the nervous system, the liver and the spinal cord. Frequent consumption of alcohol, even in small quantities, may in time have fatal consequences (delirium, acute degeneration of the brain stem and the liver, ascites). The inhaling of fuels and solvents leads to severe dependence and kills within just a few years. Cannabis (hashish) gradually leads to dementia. It destroys certain regions of the brain responsible for memory and the emotions. Regular consumers of hashish also have trouble with memory and motivation. They sink into a passive, indifferent and sullen state, cease to take responsibility and become incapable of experiencing love and joy. The smoking of cannabis is extremely harmful to the lungs (cancer).

All in all, but particularly in view of AIDS, there is everything to be gained from steering clear of alcohol and drugs.

No risk of infection

- everyday activities: on public transport, at school, in toilets, etc.
- skin contact, such as handshaking, hugging, kissing on the cheek
- sport: bathing, ball games
- restaurant meals
- sex: provided that both the partners are faithful and seronegative.

These situations are risk free provided, of course, that general rules of hygiene are observed and there is no contact with an open wound.

Protecting our children

HIV-positive mothers can pass on the disease to a child during pregnancy and childbirth, or through breastfeeding. If no preventive action is taken, roughly one child in three of an HIV-positive mother becomes infected. But nowadays improvements in treatment have reduced the danger of transmission during pregnancy and childbirth. In industrialised countries the use of antiviral drugs and Caesarian sections has reduced the rate of infection to 2%. For this reason, women should take the HIV test within the first three months of pregnancy. If the mother-to-be is HIV positive she can then benefit from prophylactic medication and greatly reduce the risk of passing on the disease to her child. After the birth, breastfeeding should be avoided and the newborn given an appropriate substitute.

Meticulous choice of partner, faithfulness, abstinence, the HIV test and the condom are all ways of preventing or reducing the risk of infection. They become more effective in combination. Thanks to this choice of safeguards and to their combination, everyone can reduce the risks of infection.

What makes the AIDS virus HIV so dangerous?

- HIV is transmitted sexually.
- Just one sexual encounter can be enough to infect you.
- HIV can enter the body either via an open wound or through an intact mucous membrane.
- The latency period, from the moment of infection to the onset of the illness (AIDS) lasts several years, during which the infected person is often unaware that they are carrying the virus.
- During the latency period an infected person can pass on the virus to others, particularly their sexual partner, without knowing it.
- Everyone infected with HIV sooner or later falls ill with AIDS.
- AIDS kills within just a few years.
- Once someone is infected with HIV, they remain so for the rest of their life. This is why the only way to combat AIDS is to adopt risk free behaviour.
- It is still unsure whether a vaccine against AIDS will ever be found.
- Antiviral drugs (in developed countries, since 1996) are very expensive, have numerous side effects and fail to completely eliminate the virus.

Frequent and ill-considered changes of partner are the engine of the AIDS epidemic. Alcohol and drugs fuel this engine. They cloud the sense of reality and responsibility, resulting in hasty, impulsive, often unprotected sex, which is later regretted.

One of the best safeguards against AIDS is therefore not to touch alcohol or drugs.

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(adapted edition)

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