

HIV

HIV is a complicated and wide ranging subject, we could not hope to provide and maintain a comprehensive resource on this site, therefore we recommend that you seek more information by following the links on the links page. We cover the basics of HIV here: transmission, symptoms, how to protect yourself against being infected and what to do if you think you may be infected.

How HIV is transmitted

HIV is spread mainly in one of three ways:

- By having anal or vaginal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV, unprotected oral sex also carries some risk;
- From a mother to her unborn child, at birth or through breastfeeding; or
- By sharing drug-injecting equipment, such as needles and syringes.

The virus cannot be passed on through touching, shaking hands or hugging, so coming into contact with someone with HIV is perfectly safe.

How HIV Infection Happens

You have heard that people in "high-risk groups" can get HIV. But it's not who you are, it's what you do. High-risk behavior will leave you open to HIV infection, no matter who you are.

High-risk behavior is

Having unprotected anal or vaginal sex with someone who is infected. "Unprotected" means without a latex condom. Although it's easier for the receptive partner to be infected, research has shown that the virus can also move in the opposite direction, infecting the insertive partner. Therefore, it doesn't matter if you're a "top" or "bottom," man or woman: you can be infected without protection.

Unprotected, receptive anal and vaginal sex appear to be the most common routes of sexual transmission.

Oral sex is less risky, but it is possible to become infected orally. Sharing needles and syringes with an infected person or injecting any substance with an unsterile needle is probably the most direct way to become infected. (Sex partners of people who shoot drugs are also at greater risk if they have unprotected sex.)

Symptoms of new HIV infection

Between 50% and 90% of people who are newly infected with HIV experience flu-like symptoms, swollen glands or a rash as their body struggles to recover from the onslaught of the virus. That mini-health crisis, known as "seroconversion illness" or "acute retroviral infection" in HIV speak, may in the long-term cause damage to your body's defence (immune) system. This is because HIV can weaken the body's defence system - that is the body's ability to fight off infection. If your defence system is damaged in this way, certain infections, which you would normally be able to shake off, can become very serious. However, it is important to remember that you can be HIV Positive without having any symptoms or illnesses for a number of years. **But you can still pass on the virus.**

People who have had HIV for a while often have years to consider whether to treat or not to treat with combination drug therapies. But if you think you're in the first weeks or months of HIV infection, there is reason to believe that you might be able to act fast and use treatment to

permanently change the course of disease. Without treatment, levels of HIV increase greatly in those first few months, the virus inserts itself into your CD4 cells (these are white blood cells which are part of your body's immune system) and multiplies. The higher levels of HIV climb in those first few months, the more difficult they may be to lower when you confront the virus with medication later. Research jargon calls this initial point of the virus its "set point," the highest peak.

Taking good care of your health generally will help you to stay in control of your life and give your body's defence system a better chance of fighting infection. If you feel your doctor is not knowledgeable enough about HIV, ask to see one who is as soon as possible. A visiting consultant comes over from the Manchester Department of GUM approx once a month. Ideally the doctor should agree a plan with you to have regular check-ups and agree any treatment necessary. On the regular check-ups they usually take a blood test to measure the amount of virus in your blood, this is called viral load testing. They may also continue checking your CD4 count and other blood levels. All of these should be with your 'informed' consent - meaning you should understand exactly what test is being suggested and why. You should consider the following points:

- Some treatments work best if they are started early, even before any symptoms appear. However, it is never too late to start treatment.
- Don't ignore symptoms. If you become ill, or notice any new unexplained changes in your health, see a doctor who knows about HIV - even if it isn't time for your check-up.
- Get enough rest. Your body will tell you when it's tired - learn to listen to it.
- Try and avoid unnecessary stress, or at least attempt to reduce stress causing activities. The reason being, that stress can make you feel tense, anxious and unable to sleep or concentrate. This then has an adverse affect on your body's defence system.
- Keep as fit as you can, but don't wear yourself out. If you haven't been doing any exercise, begin slowly, even moderate exercise, such as regular walking can help you feel fitter.
- Think about the foods you eat, a poor diet will affect your body's ability to fight infection. If you're not sure, discuss it with your doctor, health adviser or practice nurse - they may be able to help or (if you're HIV positive) you can get a free copy of a booklet about nutrition for people with HIV from the National AIDS Manual (NAM) publications on 020 7627 3200.
- If you smoke, HIV can affect your lungs, and smoking cigarettes or other substances will irritate your lungs and increase your chances of getting lung disease. Again if you choose to stop smoking your doctor, health adviser or practice nurse may be able to help.

What is AIDS

AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) now more commonly referred to as Advanced HIV Infection. A doctor will only diagnose advanced HIV infection if you develop certain infections, known as opportunistic infections, or cancers. One of the most common of these infections is a type of pneumonia (PCP). You may have heard it said that someone "died of AIDS." This is not entirely accurate, since it is the opportunistic infections that cause death.



If you are worried

If you are worried that you may have contracted the HIV virus, or any other sexually transmitted infection (STI), you can visit the Nobles Hospital Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic, usually at a time convenient to yourself.

The GUM clinic has been re-structured and now has one full time dedicated health care professional and a back-up who are on duty at all times. Gone are the days when it was Tuesday's and Thursday's for men, and Wednesday's and Friday's for women! You no longer have to sit around staring at each other, anxious in case you get recognised.

This dedicated staffing ensures a consistent and confidential approach. The clinic itself has been re-located to the rear of the hospital, meaning you don't even have to enter the hospital itself.

To make a private appointment or to discuss any worries you may have, please contact Amanda Dawson, by telephoning 642642 and asking the operator to bleep Amanda on 104.

Counselling should always be offered before an HIV test, there may be issues you have not yet considered. You do not have to reveal your identity. The clinic are eager to make people aware that this type of confidential service exists on the Island, and you should no longer feel that you have to leave the Island for an HIV or any other type of test.