



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ082

GYNECOLOGIC PROBLEMS

## HIV and Women

- **How does human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection occur?**
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### How does human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection occur?

**Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** enters the bloodstream through certain body fluids—in most cases, blood or semen. Once in the blood, the virus invades and kills cells of the **immune system**. These cells are white blood cells called CD4 cells. When these cells are destroyed, the body is less able to fight disease. The number of these white blood cells often decreases in patients with advanced HIV infection.

### How is HIV infection spread?

HIV infection is spread through contact with some types of body fluids of an infected person. This contact can happen during sex or by sharing needles used to inject drugs. An infected woman who is pregnant can pass the virus to her baby. Women with HIV who breastfeed also can pass the virus to their babies. Once someone is infected, he or she always will carry the virus and can pass it to others.

HIV cannot be spread by casual contact with people and objects. The virus cannot get through skin that is not broken.

### What happens after a person becomes infected with HIV?

HIV causes **acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)**. A person infected with HIV does not get sick with AIDS right away. The virus attacks the immune system over time. Shortly after infection, some people have a brief illness like the flu. As the immune system becomes weaker, people infected with HIV may have weight loss, fatigue, and fever.

The infection is called AIDS when a person has certain conditions or symptoms that result from a weakened immune system. It also is called AIDS when the number of a person's CD4 cells decreases below a certain level.

### How can I be tested for HIV?

A simple blood test can tell you whether you have been infected with HIV. It looks for HIV **antibodies** in the blood. This test is not an AIDS test. It does not tell you if you have AIDS or if you will get sick.

There are several types of HIV tests. A rapid screening test produces very quick results (in about 20 minutes). It often takes about 2 weeks to get results from the other types of screening tests. No matter what type of test is taken, if the test result is positive, another test is used to confirm the results.

### Who should be tested for HIV infection?

Women and men aged 19–64 years should be tested for HIV. People in other age groups also may need to be tested depending on their risk factors. It is especially important for pregnant women to be tested for HIV as part of their prenatal care—even if they do not think they may be infected. Counseling may be given before the test, after getting the results, or both.

## Is there treatment for HIV infection?

There is no vaccine to prevent HIV infection, and there is no cure for AIDS. However, there are some medications that fight HIV-related infections and help protect the immune system. In most cases, many medications are used together. Your health care provider will work with you to determine what medicines you should take, when you should take them, and how much you should take of each. It is important to take these drugs exactly as your doctor prescribes. Taking the drugs correctly can help you live a longer, healthier life.

## What can I do to prevent HIV infection?

The best way to help prevent the spread of HIV infection during sex is by using latex condoms. Condoms made from natural skin or lambskin do not prevent infection. When used properly, latex condoms can reduce the chances that one partner will infect the other. For best protection, condoms should be worn every time you have sex.

Ask about your partner's sexual history and whether he or she has ever used intravenous drugs. You and your partner may want to be tested before you begin having sex.

If you are using IV drugs, get help and try to stop. If you cannot stop, do not share needles. If you share needles, the HIV-infected blood left in the needles after injecting can get into you or your needle-sharing partner. Make sure that the needle is clean. Needles should be cleaned after every use with both laundry bleach and water.

## Glossary

**Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS):** A group of signs and symptoms, usually of severe infections, occurring in a person whose immune system has been damaged by infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

**Antibodies:** Proteins in the blood produced to fight off foreign substances, such as bacteria and viruses that cause infection.

**Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV):** A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes AIDS.

**Immune System:** The body's natural defense system against foreign substances and invading organisms that can cause disease.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ082:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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