

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# AIDS

Second of Series

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The Massachusetts Department of Public Health works to maintain, protect and improve the health and well-being of the people of the Commonwealth. AIDS has recently received national attention and raised many issues for people. Following are some of the common questions raised by citizens of the Commonwealth, with answers that are provided by research physicians and experts of the Governor's Task Force on AIDS.

### In What Bodily Fluids Has the AIDS Virus, HTLV-III, Been Isolated?

The virus is found primarily in blood and semen. It has also been isolated in smaller amounts in saliva and tears. No studies have detected the virus in sweat, urine or feces but scientists are investigating these possibilities. Precaution should always be taken in handling any of these substances, but **transmission by any means other than sexual contact or direct injection with infected blood has never been demonstrated.**

### How Contagious is AIDS?

Research shows that large amounts of infected fluids such as blood and sexual discharges must enter the body to spread the disease. **Fluids that carry the HTLV-III virus in small amounts, such as tears or saliva, are not a means of transmitting the virus casually.** These infected fluids would have to enter the body through open wounds. The body's first defense is intact skin which provides a barrier to any invading organism. Therefore, **the AIDS virus cannot be transmitted by a kiss, a water fountain, swimming pools, door knobs, shared pens or surfaces in restrooms.** The virus is transmitted by sexual contacts, sharing of needles and blood to blood contact.

### Can the Virus Live for a Long Time Outside the Body?

Unlike bacteria, the virus cannot reproduce outside a living cell. The HTLV-III virus needs a host to give it life. This host is the T-Cell, part of the body's immune response. Once the virus is outside of the body, it becomes fragile: susceptible to changes in the environment such as heat and light. Household bleach (1 part bleach to 10 parts water) kills the virus, as well as hot sudsy water used to clean utensils. In the 13,000 households where AIDS has been diagnosed, no family members have caught the disease by casual contact.

### How do Children and Babies Get AIDS?

Four ways: blood transfusions; by the virus crossing into the fetus' blood through the placenta; through exposure to an infected mother's blood during childbirth; and possibly through breast milk.

### Is It Safe to Allow Children With AIDS to Attend School?

Upon recommendation of the Governor's Task Force on AIDS, the Department of Public Health issued a policy on school attendance for children with AIDS. The policy, consistent with the guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control, and endorsed by the Department of Education, is based on sound scientific findings and allows a child with AIDS under the care of a personal physician to attend regular classes with the following exceptions: open skin sores that are not able to be covered; inappropriate behavior such as biting or frequent incontinence; or if the child is too ill. The child also may be excluded from classes if there is an outbreak of any illness in the school.

The Department of Public Health understands the existing fear and anxiety and is offering in-service education to the school districts. To date, there have been 8 children diagnosed with the disease and 4 deaths in Massachusetts. Nationally, 164 children under the age of 13 have been diagnosed with AIDS.

### **Should There be Any Concern About a Person With AIDS Working in the Food Industry?**

**There is no scientific reason to support the notion that the virus can be transmitted by an infected person handling food.** Existing standards require exclusion of food workers with open skin lesions, which is the only plausible method of contaminating food. A person with AIDS will always be under the care of a personal physician to make personal decisions about the work setting and personal activity. Researchers indicate that casual transmission of the virus has not occurred in close family environments.

### **Is There Any Risk of Transmission of the Virus From a Person With AIDS in Any Work Environment?**

No, the virus is not casually transmitted by sharing telephones or common office equipment. Again, researchers state that casual transmission of the virus has not occurred in close family environments.

### **Can AIDS Be Transmitted Through Heterosexual Contact?**

Epidemiological data indicates that approximately 1% of AIDS cases have resulted from heterosexual contact, usually from a partner who was an intravenous drug user. Research indicates that the virus can be passed from men to women and from women to men although transmission occurs less easily from women to men. Risk of exposure is increased through multiple anonymous sex partners.

### **Because of the Long Incubation Period, Isn't it Possible That AIDS Could be Transmitted in Other Ways That Will Show Up in Future Years?**

The incubation period refers to the time from infection with the virus to onset of signs and symptoms associated with AIDS. Research indicates that family members of people with AIDS provide powerful evidence against modes of transmission other than those already identified. Studies show that adults diagnosed with AIDS became ill approximately two years after infection with the virus. Many family members of people with AIDS therefore have interacted closely with infected individuals before knowing about the presence of the disease and to date none has shown evidence of the AIDS virus in their blood.

### **How Safe are Blood Transfusions?**

**Blood transfusions are now safe.** The number of potentially infectious donors has been greatly reduced since members of high-risk groups are urged not to donate blood. All donated blood is now screened for the AIDS virus and the established alternate test sites allows those persons who think/fear they might have been exposed to the AIDS virus to be screened.

### **Where Can I Call for More Information?**

AIDS Hotline - (800) 235-2331 - (statewide, toll-free)  
AIDS Hotline - (617) 424-5916 - (City of Boston)  
AIDS Action Committee - (617) 437-6200 - (Administration)

### **Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

(617) 727-0368 (Health Resources Office)  
(617) 727-0049 (Office of Public Information and Health Education)  
(617) 522-4090 (Information on blood screening at alternate test sites)

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