

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

AIDS

First of Series

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The Massachusetts Department of Public Health works to maintain, protect, and improve the health of the people of the Commonwealth. It has been actively involved in the fight against AIDS. The following are some common questions about this disease raised by citizens of this state. The second AIDS fact sheet answers additional questions.

What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a disease that affects the immune system and leaves an individual vulnerable to illnesses. As defined by its name, the disease is **Acquired**, not inherited; the Immune system is **Deficient** and not able to combat disease; and it is a **Syndrome** because there are signs and symptoms that together characterize the disease. The diagnosis of AIDS is based on specific marker diseases. The two marker diseases most commonly found in people with AIDS are *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, a lung infection caused by a parasite, and Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare form of cancer of the skin and lymph nodes.

AIDS is caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). How the body reacts to this infection may be influenced by a number of other factors (such as other infections, genetics, stress, drug use) which have yet to be fully identified. Infected persons often do not develop AIDS for several years.

How is the AIDS virus transmitted?

The AIDS virus cannot be transmitted through casual (normal social) contact. HIV is transmitted primarily by sexual contact with an infected partner and by sharing infected needles. Infected women can transmit the AIDS virus to their babies during pregnancy or birth or, in rare cases, through breast milk.

The risk of contracting the AIDS virus from blood transfusions has been practically eliminated. Most individuals involved in high-risk behaviors have voluntarily stopped giving blood, and all donated blood is screened for evidence of HIV infection.

What puts an individual at risk?

The risk of infection is increased by the following:

- Sexual intercourse between men, particularly without the use of latex condoms.
- Sharing needles and "works" (cookers and syringes) used to take drugs.
- A history of having received multiple blood transfusions and/or blood products between 1978 and July 1985.
- Being a sex partner of someone in any of the above categories.
- Sexual intercourse with multiple opposite-sex (heterosexual) partners, particularly without the protection of latex condoms.

To date, sexual activity between men ranks as the riskiest behavior, accounting for two thirds (66%) of adult AIDS cases diagnosed in the U.S. Use of intravenous drugs ranks second, at 16%, with an additional 8% of AIDS cases diagnosed among men with both risk factors. Nationally, only 4% of AIDS cases diagnosed to date have been attributed to heterosexual transmission.

What are the symptoms of HIV infection?

Most people infected with HIV have no symptoms at all, while many others experience symptoms that include persistent fevers or night sweats, severe fatigue, recurrent diarrhea, unexplained weight loss of ten pounds or more, swollen glands in at least two parts of the body, and yeast infections. This set of symptoms is often referred to as AIDS-Related Complex or ARC. These symptoms can be common to other illnesses. They suggest AIDS only when they are severe, long-lasting, or come back again and again.

A patient has AIDS when he or she is diagnosed as having a specific life-threatening disease or opportunistic infection as defined by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. The two most frequent diseases are *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, characterized by shortness of breath, and Kaposi's sarcoma, characterized by small purplish growths on the skin or mucous membranes. It is important to note that at any stage of HIV infection, with or without symptoms, a person is able to transmit the AIDS virus.

How is AIDS treated?

There currently is no cure for AIDS. Doctors concentrate primarily on treating the opportunistic diseases through antibiotics, chemotherapy, radiation, and other medications. Many treatments have dangerous side effects, and infections may recur when treatment stops. Drugs that act directly on HIV are being evaluated. The first drug of this type to be licensed in the U.S. (Retrovir or AZT) prolongs the lives of some AIDS patients. Worldwide research continues in this most important area.

Can AIDS be prevented?

AIDS is a preventable disease. HIV is a blood-borne, sexually transmitted virus. The following are recommended to prevent transmission of the virus:

- Maintain a monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner, or abstain from sex.
- Avoid having sex with multiple partners. The risk of exposure to HIV increases with the number of sexual partners.
- Unless you are sure your partner has not been infected, practice "safer sex" by preventing the exchange of body fluids (primarily semen, blood and vaginal secretions) which may be infectious. Studies indicate that HIV cannot penetrate latex condoms that are used properly.
- Never inject drugs that aren't ordered by your doctor. If you do use intravenous drugs, do not share needles, "cookers" or syringes with others.
- People infected with the AIDS virus, or whose present or prior activities put them at risk for HIV infection, should not donate blood, plasma, semen, breast milk, organs, or other body tissues.
- Women who have injected drugs, or who are sex partners of people known or suspected to be HIV-infected, should see a doctor if they are considering pregnancy.

How has Massachusetts responded to AIDS?

The Administration has responded to this serious social, economic, and health problem by:

- Establishing the Governor's Task Force on AIDS to advise in the critical areas of policy development and education.
- Continuing extensive education and in-service training through the Department of Public Health's educators and a toll-free hotline, and supporting community outreach through DPH community resource specialists, the AIDS Action Committee, and other community agencies.
- Developing and implementing community-based services (including expansion of home care) and resources to meet the needs of people with AIDS.
- Funding research on AIDS prevention, cure and treatment, as well as basic research toward vaccine development. This broad range of research and service programs has yielded valuable scientific, epidemiological, and educational data that provide significant insight into this devastating disease.
- Establishing alternative testing sites throughout the Commonwealth, where individuals concerned about possible exposure to the AIDS virus can receive free, anonymous counseling and antibody testing.
- Supporting confidential counseling and testing at DPH-sponsored clinics for sexually transmitted diseases and drug dependency.

For more information:

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Toll-Free Statewide AIDS Hotline 1-800-235-2331
English/Spanish AIDS Hotline (413) 737-2632
Office of Health Resources (617) 727-0368
Community Health Resource Specialists:
Boston (617) 437-6200
Central Mass. (617) 856-6028
Southeastern Mass. (617) 362-2511, x380
Western Mass. (413) 562-7583
Alternative Test Site Program (617) 727-9080
Office of Public Information and Health Education (617) 727-0049

AIDS Action Committee
Hotline (617) 536-7733
Services (617) 437-6200

City of Boston
AIDS Hotline (617) 424-5916

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