***What is HIV?***

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is the virus that can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Unlike some other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV. That means that once you have HIV, you have it for life.

HIV affects specific cells of the immune system, called CD4 cells, or T cells. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of these cells that the body can’t fight off infections and disease. When this happens, HIV infection leads to AIDS.

***How is HIV transmitted?***

Only certain fluids—blood, semen (*cum*), pre-seminal fluid (*pre-cum*), rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk—from an HIV-infected person can transmit HIV. These fluids must come in contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue or be directly injected into the bloodstream (from a needle or syringe) for transmission to possibly occur. Mucous membranes can be found inside the rectum, the vagina, the opening of the penis, and the mouth.

Injecting drugs, including hormones, steroids, or silicone, can transmit HIV directly through needles or equipment (works). In addition, some drugs, such as methamphetamine, cocaine, or alcohol, may put you at risk for HIV by lowering your inhibitions and making you more likely to engage in risky behavior.

In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by: 1) having sex with someone who has HIV. Anal sex is the highest-risk sexual behavior. Receptive anal sex (bottoming) is riskier than insertive anal sex (topping). Vaginal sex is the second highest-risk sexual behavior. Having multiple sex partners or having other sexually transmitted infections can increase the risk of infection through sex. 2) Sharing needles, syringes, rinse water, or other equipment (works) used to prepare injection drugs with someone who has HIV.

Less commonly, HIV may be spread by: 1) being born to an infected mother. HIV can be passed from mother to child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding. 2) Being stuck with an HIV-contaminated needle or other sharp object. This is a risk mainly for health care workers. 3) Receiving blood transfusions, blood products, or organ/tissue transplants that are contaminated with HIV. This risk is extremely small because of rigorous testing of the US blood supply and donated organs and tissues.

HIV does not survive long outside the human body (such as on surfaces), and it cannot reproduce. It **is not** spread by air or water, insects, including mosquitoes or ticks, saliva, tears, or sweat, casual contact like shaking hands or sharing dishes, closed-mouth or “social” kissing, or toilet seats.

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***How can I prevent HIV?***

Today, more tools than ever are available to prevent HIV. In addition to limiting your number of sexual partners, never sharing needles, and using condoms correctly and consistently, you may be able to take advantage of newer biomedical options such as pre-exposure and post-exposure prophylaxis.

***Reducing sexual risk:***

* Choose less risky sexual behaviors. Oral sex is much less risky than anal or vaginal sex. Anal sex is the highest-risk sexual activity for HIV transmission. If you are HIV-negative, insertive anal sex (topping) is less risky for getting HIV than receptive anal sex (bottoming). Sexual activities that do not involve the potential exchange of bodily fluids carry no risk for getting HIV (e.g., touching).
* Use condoms consistently and correctly.
* Reduce the number of people you have sex with. The number of sex partners you have affects your HIV risk.

***Reducing risk associated with injection drug use:***

* Use only new needles, syringes, and other injection equipment (works, such as cookers, cotton, or water) each time you inject. Many communities have programs where you can get new needles and syringes, new injection works, and other new supplies, as well as health care services.
* Use only new syringes that come from reliable sources (e.g., pharmacies or syringe service programs/needle-syringe programs).
* Never share needles, syringes, or other injection works.
* Be careful not to touch another person’s blood.
* Dispose of needles and syringes safely after one use. Use a sharps container or make sure to keep used needles and syringes away from other people.

***Other prevention:***

* Talk to your doctor about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), taking HIV medicine daily to prevent HIV infection, if you are at substantial risk for HIV.
* Talk to your doctor right away (within 3 days) about post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) if you have a possible exposure to HIV. Get tested and treated for HIV and other STDs and encourage your partners to do the same. If you are sexually active, get tested at least once a year. STDs can increase your chance of getting HIV or transmitting it to others.
* One additional prevention note: If you are likely to be in a situation where alcohol and other kinds of drugs will be used, have a condom with you in case you have sex.

Adapted from CDC – HIV/AIDS; 2014