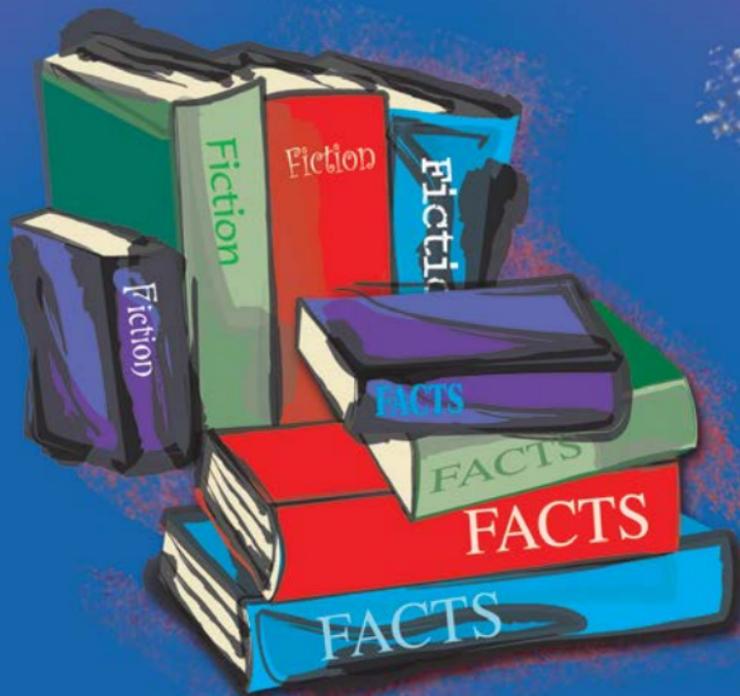


**LET'S TALK** about



# ***Separating facts from fiction***

PROTECT YOURSELF. PROTECT OTHERS.

Many people have questions about HIV/AIDS. This handout was created to help answer those questions and provide the facts.

Additional information on HIV can be found at:

[cdc.gov/hiv/treatmentworks](https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/treatmentworks)

## **General myths about HIV.**

**Myth: If I had HIV, I'd feel sick.**

**Fact:** Not necessarily. People can have HIV without symptoms for years. Even if a person with HIV feels good, the virus is still reproducing in the body. You may be surprised to learn that an estimated 1.2 million people are living with HIV in the United States. Of those individuals, approximately 1 in 8 do not know they are infected.

**Myth: HIV only affects certain groups of people.**

**Fact:** Anyone can get HIV—and you can become infected the first time you are exposed to the virus. HIV is spread through body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. HIV is most commonly passed from one person to another through anal or vaginal sex, and by sharing needles or drug works. In addition, a mother can pass HIV to her baby during pregnancy, during labor, or through breastfeeding.

## **Myths about transmission of HIV.**

**Myth: A diagnosis of HIV is a death sentence.**

**Fact:** Although HIV is serious and there is no cure, people with HIV can now live longer, healthier lives thanks to early detection, and new and more effective treatments.

**Myth: My viral load is undetectable, so I can't spread HIV.**

**Fact:** Yes, it is possible that you could still transmit HIV. However, having an undetectable viral load greatly lowers the chance of transmitting the virus to your sexual partners who are HIV-negative. An HIV-positive person can still potentially infect a partner even if they have an undetectable viral load, because of the reasons listed below.

- HIV may still be found in genital fluids (e.g., semen, vaginal fluids). The viral load test only measures virus in blood. Although antiretroviral therapy (ART) also lowers viral load in genital fluids, HIV can sometimes be present in genital fluids even when it is undetectable in the blood.
- Your viral load may go up between tests. When this happens, you may be more likely to transmit HIV to sexual partners. Your viral load may go up without you knowing it because you may not feel any different.
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) increase viral load in genital fluids. This means that an HIV-positive person with an STD may be able to transmit HIV to sexual partners even if the blood viral load is undetectable.

***Myth: If I already have HIV and my partner does too, we can have unprotected sex.***

***Fact:*** You could catch another STD, such as gonorrhea, or syphilis, or another viral infection such as hepatitis C (a serious liver infection), if you don't use a condom. What you may not know is that getting another STD can increase your HIV viral load, which may speed the progression of your HIV infection. Your viral load can rise even if you're on medication for HIV (antiretroviral drugs).

***Myth: My viral load is low, so I can stop taking my HIV medicines.***

***Fact:*** It is very important for you to take your HIV medicines exactly as directed. If you don't, your CD4 count may go down and your viral load may go up. When the viral load is high, risk for HIV transmission is the greatest. Even when the serum viral load is undetectable, HIV can still exist in semen, vaginal and rectal fluids, and breast milk. Taking your HIV medicine is important to help you live a longer and healthier life. Not taking your medicines as directed can also make the HIV virus resistant, which means the medicines won't help you anymore.

***Myth: Because I have HIV, I should be careful about everyday activities such as sharing the telephone and shaking people's hands.***

***Fact:*** HIV cannot be caught from everyday activities, casual contact such as shaking hands, or from ordinary objects such as a doorknob, telephone, or toilet seat. The virus does not live long outside the body.

## **Myths about HIV therapy.**

**Myth: Antiretroviral drugs will cure my HIV.**

**Fact:** Antiretroviral drugs help control reproduction of the virus and slow the progression of the disease. But they are not a cure for HIV.

Remember: It's important to take your HIV medicines exactly as your doctor tells you. If you don't, your viral load may go up. In addition, the virus may become resistant, and your medicines could stop working.

**Myth: HIV treatment is too expensive.**

**Fact:** Treatment programs and support services are available even for those who have no insurance. Medicaid is the nation's largest source of public funding for AIDS care, and the Ryan White Program provides care and support for those with limited or no health insurance.

For more information, call your local health department, or call

**CDC-INFO at 800-232-4636.**

***Myth: There is a cure for HIV.***

***Fact:*** Rich or poor, there is no cure for HIV. There are ways to prolong a person's life, but once you get HIV, you will have it for the rest of your life.

## ***Myths about recreational drug use and HIV.***

***Myth: If I already have HIV, I can share needles with other people who have HIV.***

***Fact:*** You shouldn't share needles, works, cottons, or water because you could get hepatitis C, a serious liver infection. Hepatitis C is one of the leading causes of chronic liver disease in the United States and hepatitis C infection progresses more rapidly to liver damage in HIV-infected persons. Outbreaks of hepatitis C have occurred among HIV-positive gay men.

Hepatitis C can result in other health problems, such as liver cancer or liver disease, which has become a major cause of hospital admissions, liver transplants, and deaths among people living with HIV. Hepatitis C infection may also impact the course and management of HIV infection. So don't share your needles, works, cottons, or water.

**Myth: I only snort drugs (not shoot up), so I can share equipment without worrying about HIV.**

**Fact:** Infected blood from inside one person's nose can be passed to another person through shared straws or other drug-snorting equipment. So don't do it.

## **Myths about HIV and other STDs.**

**Myth: All STDs have symptoms.**

**Fact:** Not true. Chlamydia, gonorrhea, and herpes are some of the STDs that you or your partner may have without knowing it. That's why it's so important to always use a condom during sexual activity of any kind.

**Myth: Getting another STD when I have HIV is no big deal.**

**Fact:** Actually, it can be a big deal. If you have HIV, getting another infection, such as syphilis or hepatitis C, can increase your HIV viral load, which may speed the progression of your HIV infection. Your viral load can go up even if you're taking medicines for your HIV (antiretroviral drugs).

## Resources

---



### [cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks](http://cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks)

a website designed for persons living with HIV that includes information about HIV and features real people from across the United States talking about how sticking with care and treatment helps them stay healthy, live a longer, healthier life and prevent transmission.

### [cdc.gov/Features/LetsStopHIV](http://cdc.gov/Features/LetsStopHIV)

designed for anyone who is HIV-positive along with their friends and family, featuring celebrities and others living with HIV.

### [cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking](http://cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking)

has information geared toward gay men about how to talk to your partner(s) about sex.

### [aidsinfo.nih.gov](http://aidsinfo.nih.gov)

has up-to-date treatment information for HIV/AIDS (or call 1-800-448-0440).

### [findhivcare.hrsa.gov/search\\_HAB.aspx](http://findhivcare.hrsa.gov/search_HAB.aspx)

helps you find a nearby Ryan White Program (or call 877-646-4772).

### **1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)**

provides general information about HIV and its treatment.

