

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

Medicine has come a long way in terms of HIV treatment, and people living with HIV can have a normal life expectancy. But to get treated you need to get diagnosed. Read on to learn more about HIV and why screening for it is so important.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is a virus that infects certain immune cells in the body called CD4 or T-cells. Over time, the virus destroys this cell line and the body cannot fight off other infections and becomes very sick. Before the 1990s, people with HIV would go on to develop Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) over a few years. Now, if the virus is detected early and a person gets treatment, the progression to AIDS can sometimes be stopped altogether.

How common is HIV?

In the United States, there are about 1.2 million people living with HIV, with 44,073 new cases diagnosed in 2014. Importantly, about one in eight people with HIV do not know they are infected¹.

How could I be exposed to HIV?

HIV is present in blood, semen, vaginal fluids, breastmilk, and rectal fluids. Mucous membranes (penis, vulva/clitoris/vagina, anus/rectum, mouth) need to come in contact with an infected person's mucous membranes to transfer infected fluids, and the virus gets into the body through breaks in the skin. In terms of sex, unprotected receptive anal sex is the highest risk activity, followed by unprotected vaginal sex. That's because the mucous membranes in these areas are delicate and more likely to be damaged during sex, allowing the virus to get into the body. This is why it is important to use condoms and sufficient lubricants to avoid minor skin tears.

If I have been exposed to HIV, how long until I might have symptoms?

Most people do not have significant symptoms, but some people may experience flu-like symptoms two to four weeks after getting infected which can easily be mistaken for a cold or flu.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HIV/AIDS.
<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/statistics.html>

What are the symptoms of acute HIV?

Most of the time, acute HIV infection has no symptoms or symptoms that are too mild to notice, like low grade body aches or mild fever. That's why screening (testing when you have no symptoms) is so important. Without treatment, over years, as the immune system is weakened by the virus, a person can develop AIDS, which causes numerous symptoms as opportunistic infections assault the body.

PrEP

If you are at increased risk for HIV, we recommend you learn about PrEP, which stands for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis. PrEP is a daily anti-HIV medication you can take which, along with regular condom use, can dramatically reduce your chances of becoming infected.

How do you test for HIV?

We test for HIV infection in one of two ways: a cheek swab or a blood sample. We will talk to you about the best test option for you.

How long after infection will a screening test turn positive?

The HIV cheek swab test will detect most infections one month following infection and nearly all within three months. The HIV blood test detects most infections two weeks following infection and early all at six weeks.

How will you notify me of my test results?

We relay negative results via a secure message to you via myUOHealth student portal.

If you test positive, we will call you by phone. If you don't answer, we'll leave a generic message to call us back to discuss your recent test results.

What happens if I test positive for HIV?

It is important to note the HIV screening tests do produce false positives on occasion. If you were tested via a blood test, we will add confirmatory testing onto that sample. If you had a cheek swab, we'll arrange for you to return for a blood test. Then we will schedule an appointment for you with a UHC clinician as soon as possible. At that visit, you will get all the information you need, have your questions answered, and get further testing.

Is it treatable?

While there is no cure for HIV, there are effective treatment options that can prevent it from advancing to AIDS. If the virus is caught early and treated properly, people living with HIV can have a normal life expectancy.