

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

HIV



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.
Burlington County Health Department
Health Starts Here

What is HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It weakens a person's immune system by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection. If left untreated, it can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The human body cannot get rid of HIV, even with treatment. Once you have HIV, you have it for life.

What is AIDS?

AIDS is considered to be the final stage of HIV. Where HIV is a virus, AIDS is a condition caused by HIV. Someone is considered to have AIDS once HIV has caused serious damage to the person's immune system and it can no longer fight infections in the body.

How you can get HIV:

HIV is transmitted from the bodily fluids of an infected person getting into the body of an uninfected person. However, not all bodily fluids are dangerous. HIV is carried in a person's blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk. HIV is spread by:

- Having unprotected sex with a person with HIV
- Sharing needles and syringes to inject drugs
- From a blood transfusion you received before 1985 – Today, all blood in the United States is tested for HIV so it is very unlikely you will get infected this way.
- Babies born to women with HIV can also become infected during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding.

How you can't get it:

HIV is not spread by saliva (spit), sweat, or tears. You cannot get HIV from an infected person from hugging, kissing, sharing food or drinks, public toilet seats, or through air and water. Close contact with an infected person is not enough to spread the virus.

Who should get tested for HIV?

It is recommended everyone ages 13 to 64 get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine health care. People with risk factors should get tested annually. Sexually active gay or bisexual men may benefit from getting tested every 3 to 6 months. You might have HIV and still feel perfectly healthy. **The only way to know for sure if you are infected is to be tested.** Talk with a health care provider or counselor both before and after you are tested. You can go to your doctor or health department for confidential HIV testing.

You are at a higher risk of having HIV if you:

- Are a man who has sex with other men
- Have had sex with an HIV-positive person
- Have injected drugs and shared needles or "works" (for example, water or cotton) with others
- Have been diagnosed with another STD
- Have had sex with someone who could answer yes to any of the above statements

How can I protect myself from HIV?

The best way to avoid transmission of HIV and all other sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sex and sexual acts. Using condoms when performing any sex act (vaginal, anal, and oral) is important in protecting yourself from catching HIV. Don't share needles and syringes used to inject drugs, steroids, vitamins, or for tattooing or body piercing. Talk to a doctor or health care professional if you have questions on how to prevent getting HIV.

What can I do if the test shows I have HIV?

If you have a rapid test that shows a positive result for HIV, the testing site will arrange a follow-up test to make sure the screening test was correct. It is important that you start medical care and HIV treatment as soon as you are diagnosed with HIV. Anti-retroviral therapy (ART) are a series of medications used to treat HIV infection and should be started as soon as possible. ART helps protect your immune system, can keep you healthy for many years, and greatly reduces your risk of transmitting HIV to sex partners if taken the right way, every day.

To lower your risk of transmitting HIV to others:

- Take medications to treat HIV the right way, every day
- Use condoms the right way every time you have sex
- If your partner is HIV-negative, encourage them to ask their doctor about daily medicine to prevent HIV
- If you think your partner was exposed to HIV – for example, if the condom breaks during sex- they should talk to their doctor right away (within 3 days) about taking post-exposure medication to prevent getting HIV.

Although HIV is a very serious infection, many people with HIV and AIDS are living longer, healthier lives today, thanks to new and effective treatments. It is very important to make sure you have a doctor who knows how to treat HIV. If you don't know which doctor to use, talk with a health care professional or trained HIV counselor. If you are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant, this is especially important. Health care providers and social service providers, often available at your health care provider's office, will have the tools to help you work through the early stages of your diagnosis and begin to manage your HIV.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv>
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609)265-5533
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at 1-866-448-2432 or 1-800-624-2377 or on the NJDOH Website at <http://www.nj.gov/health/>