



## Myths and Truths about HIV

There are many myths about HIV and AIDS. Some of these lead to unfair actions by others and stigma. Below you will find responses to some of the most common myths.

**Myth:** AIDS is a death sentence.

**Truth:** In the 1980s and before, people with HIV/AIDS died very soon after they found out they had the disease. Today HIV treatment allows people to live for decades with the virus. A person can live a long and full life with HIV.

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**Myth:** HIV only affects gay men and drug users.

**Truth:** All kinds of people can get HIV. It affects newborn babies, women, men, seniors, teens and people of any race. Things like unsafe sex, sex with someone who has HIV, sharing needles or IV drug use can put you at risk for HIV.

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**Myth:** AIDS can be cured by:

- New medications on the market
- Sex with a virgin

**Truth:** There is no cure for HIV. Treatment helps manage symptoms and how the virus acts in the body, but it is not a cure. People with HIV in treatment can live longer. When people stop treatment, the virus becomes stronger and the immune system weaker. This can lead to AIDS.

No sex act cures HIV. Since the 1600s, people thought that sex with a virgin could cure STDs. This is not true. Sex with a virgin puts the virgin at risk for HIV.

**Myth:** HIV/AIDS can be spread by:

- Mosquitoes
- Getting tattoos
- Toilet seats or doorknobs
- Breathing the air around a person with HIV
- Touching, hugging, kissing or holding hands with someone with HIV
- Sharing forks, knives, cups or plates with someone with HIV
- Playing sports or sharing sports gear with a person who has HIV

**Truth:** HIV is spread only by blood, semen, vaginal fluid or breast milk from someone who has HIV. The virus does not live long in the air outside the body. HIV is not spread from tears or sweat. There is very little virus in your spit.

HIV cannot be spread by day-to-day contact at work, school or social settings. You can shake hands, hug, use the same toilet, drink from the same glass, and be near when someone with HIV coughs or sneezes. None of these things spread HIV.

When a mosquito bites you, the insect puts its own spit into the person it bites. It does not inject blood from the last person it bit. Mosquito spit can carry a virus such as malaria or West Nile virus. HIV cannot be passed to people in this way.

The chance of the spread of HIV during tattoo work is low since HIV cannot survive well in the open air. Tattoos can spread other diseases like hepatitis if the artist is not careful. The use of clean and sterile tools and needles you use once then throw away reduce the risk from tattoos.

**Myth:** HIV cannot be passed to someone else:

- If you take HIV drugs
- Through oral sex
- If you use birth control methods like diaphragms, cervical caps, sponges, spermicides or the Pill, ring, or shot
- If you have an STD other than HIV
- If you rinse your needles before you share them

**Truth:** HIV treatment helps keep HIV symptoms under control. It helps keep the amount of virus in the body as low as it can. It does not stop HIV from being passed to other people.

Oral sex has less risk than other types of sex, but is not risk-free. Risk goes up if there are open sores on the sex organs or mouth, or if gum disease makes the gums bleed. Any direct contact between semen or spit and open sores in the skin or mouth will raise the risk that HIV can get into the body.

Birth control lowers the chance a woman will get pregnant. It does not protect against STDs or HIV. Some birth control products that contain the spermicide nonoxynol-9 may make it easier to get HIV.

You have more than one STD at a time. If you have an STD, you are six to ten times more likely to get or transmit HIV during sex. Your risk for HIV goes up 10 to 300 times if you have a sore from syphilis or herpes.

If you share needles to inject drugs with a person with HIV, you can get the virus. The tools used to prepare for a shot (spoon, cooker, cotton with blood) can also spread HIV.

**Myth:** The medications used to treat HIV are toxic and more harmful than the virus itself.

**Truth:** HIV meds are very strong. When you take three or more meds at a time, they can keep HIV in check for a long time. These meds have lowered the death rate from HIV/AIDS by 80%.

HIV meds do have side effects. They do not always mix well with other meds people must take. When you make a point to learn about the meds you take, know what side effects to look for and work closely with a doctor, you can have a better life in treatment.

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**Myth:** With HIV tests:

- You cannot trust the results.
- There is no point to take one.
- Not needed since I would know if my partner or I had HIV.

**Truth:** You can have HIV for up to ten years without any symptoms. Not all people react to HIV in the same way. The only sure way to know if you have HIV is to get tested.

Today, tests for HIV are better than tests for almost any other disease. The results are right in nearly 100% of the cases. When an HIV test says you have the virus, other tests are done. The other tests check for virus genes in the blood cells as a way to confirm the first test results.

When you know you have HIV it gives you the power to seek treatment. It also makes it help prevent the spread of the virus to other people.

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**Myth:** HIV is a virus made by the government. It was created for warfare or to target people of certain races.

**Truth:** In the past, some health research treated people of color unfairly and without ethics. These studies caused many people to distrust the public health system. However there is no proof that any nation is able to create such a deadly virus as HIV.

HIV affects people of color more because they do not always have access to health care or treatment.

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**Myth:** HIV/AIDS does not really exist because:

- There are so many kind of illness linked with AIDS that one virus cannot cause them all.

**Truth:** AIDS does not cause disease. Disease is the result of HIV in the body. The way HIV works is to weaken the immune system. People carry many types of germs and microbes on and in their bodies. These cannot be controlled when an immune system is weak. As a result, a person with HIV may get things like pneumonia, fungus in their mouth, vagina and rectum, rare cancers, and more.

**For more information**

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at (800) 797-1717.

