

What Does It Mean To Have HIV?

Question 1

- d *None of the above. A person with HIV does not have to cancel their life – they can live for 2 to 20 years with this virus. There will be periods of sickness and tiredness but there will also be long periods of wellness. Support people and good medical care make a huge difference.*

A positive HIV test doesn't mean you are going to die from AIDS. It's true that there is still no cure which will eliminate HIV from an infected person. However, major advances in treatment options in the last few years have meant that HIV is not likely to cause AIDS illnesses and death as in the past. You certainly won't die tomorrow, and in fact you may never develop AIDS.

In terms of relationships, sex and children, HIV can have a significant impact on your sexual and emotional life, but it won't eliminate it. Many people currently living with HIV are in a relationship or sexually active. Some people are in successful long-term relationships with a person who is HIV negative. HIV will complicate things - issues such as safe sex, lifestyle changes, and fear of infecting partners are now on the agenda. But most people find ways to successfully negotiate these situations, and talking to other positive people and healthcare providers can be invaluable.

From: *Access Information Centre* at The Alfred Fairfield House

Available at: <http://www.accessinfo.org.au/hivfs/hivdiag1.htm>

Question 2

- b *HIV can be treated. There are drugs that reduce the damage it does to a person's immune system, and drugs that help repair any damage that has been done.*

Until the mid-1990's there were few options for medical treatment of HIV. Now there is a range of anti-HIV drugs, often called 'anti-virals'. Taken together in various combinations these slow or halt the multiplication of HIV delaying or reversing the damage that HIV does to someone's immune system. They maintain the good health of people with HIV and prevent them from developing serious illnesses related to HIV. There are also additional treatment possibilities undergoing trials.

Most people do not need to start antiviral drugs immediately. HIV affects different individuals differently and unfortunately antiviral drugs have side effects that also require treatment. It is important to work out just how it is affecting your system at present. Doctors use blood test results to help them to assess this.

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Question 3

You do not have to tell anyone, and you may regret telling everyone. It may help you to have someone to talk to, but it needs to be someone you can trust in a crisis and may not be the person you are closest to. Take your time until you have had time to get used to the idea and do not tell too many people to start with.

Telling others

If there's one piece of advice from positive people and HIV workers alike it is this: take your time, think about it, and don't tell too many people at the start, before you've had a chance to sort some things out for yourself.

Most people want to talk to at least one person immediately after diagnosis. You may prefer to talk to someone close to you, or someone more removed like your doctor or another health professional. Some people prefer to talk to a complete stranger at the end of the phone. The best person to talk to may not be the person you are closest to, but perhaps a person who is a good listener or very safe with secrets.

Remember, just as you have needed time, they might also need time to process the information. Remember, there is no such thing as a real secret - people are only human. But some people are more trustworthy than others.

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Available at: <http://www.accessinfo.org.au/hivfs/hivdiag1.htm>

Question 4

Until recently the chance of a woman with HIV having a baby with HIV was about 1 in 4 (or 25%). Women in countries who have new drug treatments have less than a 1 in 50 (or 2%) chance of having a baby with HIV.

Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) could occur:

- before birth
- during birth
- after birth through breastfeeding.
- a woman can reduce the chances of HIV being passed to her child by:
 - taking anti-HIV drugs (antiretrovirals) during pregnancy from about the 4th or 5th month
 - taking antiretroviral drugs during labour
 - choosing to have a caesarean section
 - giving the baby a short course of antiretroviral drugs after birth
 - not breast-feeding.

By doing all these things the rate of transmission is 2%. With no interventions the rate of transmission can be between 25-45%. In countries where fewer facilities are available, there has been some success in reducing the transmission rate by use of a small dose of drugs during labour.

From: <http://www.avert.org/pregnanc.htm>



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Question 5

- a Yes. In some countries men with HIV can use a medical process called intracytoplasmic sperm injection which can achieve pregnancy without HIV transmission. Another low risk technique is called sperm washing. Other options include donor sperm or foster care.

The risk of transmitting HIV through infected sperm could be greatly reduced by intracytoplasmic sperm injection, injecting a single sperm into an egg. Columbia University has treated 54 infected men. So far, 29 women have become pregnant and had babies or are more than halfway through pregnancy. European methods in wider use have resulted in 250 successful pregnancies with no viral transmission. (1)

Another method called sperm washing is an experimental technique in which the semen of an HIV positive man is put into a machine which separates virus from sperm. The woman can then be artificially inseminated using this 'washed' sperm. Over 90 children have been born in Italian trials to date, with none of the mothers or children becoming HIV positive. It is hoped that this technology will be available in Australia in the near future. (2)

(1) From: *Paternity Hope for Men with HIV*, The New York Times May 2nd 2002

Available at <http://www.datalounge.com/datalounge/news/record.html?record=19806>

(2) From: *Factsheet: Women & HIV Fact Sheet 7 - Rights & Choices*, 21 October 2002

Available at <http://www.fpahealth.org.au/sex-matters/factsheets/32.html>

Question 6

- a No. Once a person is infected with HIV they can not get rid of it. Medical drugs can slow it down but not get rid of it.

There is no way to get the virus out of the body once it is in the blood stream. A person can take anti-HIV drugs (the most famous being AZT) to slow the virus making copies of itself. Drugs can also help the immune system to keep fighting off the virus. It can be controlled, but not 'got rid of', once a person is infected.

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Question 7

- b** *The T-cells (there are no G or A cells). The T-cells co-ordinate the body's response to germs and diseases, and tell the rest of the immune system to get into action and fight off the invaders. HIV takes over the T-cells and turns them into mini-factories to make more copies of HIV. Each new virus then takes over another T-cell and so on, and so on. The more T-cells you take away the less able the body is to fight disease.*

HIV and the Immune system

The immune system is a network of cells, tissues, and organs that work together to defend the body against attacks by foreign invaders. The invaders are usually germs (otherwise called microbes) – which include bacteria and viruses. It is the immune system's job to keep the germs out, or failing that, to seek out and destroy them. If the immune system becomes crippled then it is open to a torrent of diseases.

One of the important groups of immune cells are the T-cells. The T-cells co-ordinate the body's response to germs and diseases, and tell the rest of the immune system to get into action and fight off the invaders.

HIV is so devastating because it hijacks the T-cells and turns them into mini-factories to make more copies of HIV. Each new virus then takes over another T-cell and so on. T-cells are destroyed in the process. The more T-cells you take away the less able the body is to fight disease and so the person falls prey to unusual and life threatening infections and rare cancers. At this stage a person has AIDS.

Adapted from: *Understanding the Immune system: How It Works*, US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, September 2003, available at www.niaid.nih.gov

Question 8

- b** *The drugs cannot destroy the virus but they slow it down from making more copies and destroying the body's immune system.*

How HIV treatment drugs work

The drugs control the virus by stopping it from making copies of itself inside the cells of the body. Generally, the virus gets into a body cell and starts to make copies of itself, which then spread out of that cell and into another. Drug treatments interfere with the chemicals that the virus uses to make these copies. The virus can become resistant to the drugs, which means that they won't work as well. The treatment may then have to be changed to a different combination of drugs.

People taking drug treatment for HIV will probably need to take it for the rest of their lives. Stopping drug treatment, even for short periods of time, can cause the virus to become resistant to those drugs. A lot of research is being done in this area, to see if people with HIV will be able to take short breaks from treatment without harmful effects. This may be possible in the future; however, at the moment, it is not recommended.

From: Project Inform, *Anti-HIV Therapy Strategies - Information to consider when deciding to use therapy*, available at <http://www.projinf.org/fs/avstrategies.htm>



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Question 9

- b** *AIDS is defined as when a person has had one or more 'AIDS defining illnesses' and a T-cell count of below 200. An 'AIDS defining illness' is the kind of disease a person could get because their immune system is so vulnerable, like certain kinds of cancers, or pneumonia. A low T-cell count tells a person that the virus has destroyed a lot of their healthy T-cells.*

HIV/AIDS is often written and referred to as one word with one meaning. But HIV and AIDS have two different meanings.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This is the virus that can cause AIDS. If you have been infected with HIV you are said to be HIV-positive.

At the moment, there is no cure for HIV and the virus will always remain in your blood. However, it is important to remember that many people who are HIV-positive look and feel healthy.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

AIDS is rarely one disease but rather a group or combination of illnesses that develop because the body can no longer fight disease as it normally would. Treatments now available cannot cure HIV but may delay the development of AIDS for many years.

Adapted from: <http://www.multiculturalhivhepc.net/English/hiv aids/O2/content.html>

