

with HIV. HIV can also be passed on to a baby during childbirth or breastfeeding.



A note on stigma

Many myths and misconceptions about HIV or AIDS are a result of stigma towards BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, people who inject drugs, and sex workers. Misinformation based on stigma has been used to blame and reduce access to services. Knowing about HIV myths can prepare you to support others and yourself in a caring and honest way.

Harm Reduction Tips

- Get routine HIV/STI testing (it's often free)
- Avoid sharing syringes and works; use a new needle as often as you can
- During sex, use barriers like external condoms, internal condoms, or dental dams. Using lube during sex can reduce the chance of small tears (tearing can occur during vaginal sex, but it is more common during anal).
- Disinfect sex toys between partners.
- Consider non-penetrative sex acts (like oral sex) where HIV transmission isn't spread (other STIs can still be transmitted through oral). You can still get HIV from oral sex, but the chance is MUCH LOWER compared to anal or vaginal sex.
- **Know your risk, know your status, know your rights.** Stay informed! Learn more about HIV/AIDS, HCV, sexual health, drug user health, & more at: nextdistro.org/resources



Are you a NEXT Distro participant? Have a question? Need help finding support? Want to learn where to access a free HIV Test, access PrEP or PEP, or receive HIV medical care if you have tested positive for HIV?

Connect with NEXT's support services team members!

Email Presto, coordinator of support services:

presto@nextdistro.org

For more information & resources, visit:

www.nextdistro.org/resources



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HIV 101 for People Who Use Drugs

In 2020, 30,635 people were diagnosed with HIV in the U.S. Since the 1980's, there has been a lot of improvement in the support and effectiveness of HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment. **Thanks to the hard work of people living with HIV and activists**, availability and access to services have increased. **Today, many options exist to prevent HIV transmission, reduce HIV-related complications, and increase positive health outcomes for all. This guide serves as a starting point for someone who uses drugs and is living with HIV.**

No matter your status, you deserve to be informed.

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a lifelong condition that attacks and weakens the immune system. With treatment, people living with HIV can live a long and healthy life.

What is a viral load?

The amount of **HIV** cells in the body is also called '**viral load**'. This can indicate the presence and progression of HIV in the body. The higher the viral load, the higher chance of severe complications as the immune system weakens.

What's the difference between HIV and AIDS?

HIV is the virus weakening the immune system while AIDS is a specific stage of advanced HIV.

- Without treatment, HIV progresses into **Acquired ImmunoDeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)**. This is the result of a weakened immune system due to HIV, and people with AIDS usually have a high viral load.
- AIDS is very likely to lead to serious complications but HIV medication can prevent its progression into AIDS and support a long, healthy life.

HIV + Harm Reduction History

HIV and Harm Reduction have a close history. In the mid-1980's, the term 'harm reduction' was first popularized during the **HIV** epidemic among people who injected drugs, sex workers, and people in queer and trans communities. Early harm reduction initiatives like HIV blood testing and syringe exchange programs reduced the spread of HIV. But it wasn't until the late 80's that **HIV** antibody tests became available and syringe exchange programs were created in the United States.

HIV 101 Basics



How does HIV spread?

- HIV is present in :
 - **Blood**
 - **Semen (cum & precum)**
 - **Vaginal Fluid**
 - **Breastmilk**
- HIV can be transmitted through:
 - Anal or vaginal sex without a condom
 - Sharing syringes, needles, or works used to inject
 - From a mother (or birthing parent) to child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding

For HIV to spread it must be absorbed from bodily fluids into the bloodstream through an open area of the body (mucus membranes like eyes, nose, or mouth) or an open wound on the skin. However, simply touching someone's body fluids won't transmit HIV.

You can't only rely on symptoms to know your status.

HIV testing is the only way to know for sure. In the early stages (within a year of exposure) symptoms are "flu-like" and often include fever, fatigue, headaches, and weight loss. In later stages and over time (several years), symptoms become more severe and opportunistic infections (like pneumonia) become common.

How is HIV treated?

HIV is treated with daily medications (known as antiretroviral therapy or ART), which help manage it by reducing *viral load* and preventing **HIV** from progressing into **AIDS**. HIV treatment stops the virus from reproducing and allows the immune system to fight infections effectively; however, it does not cure HIV.

U = U

Undetectable = **U**ntransmittable

- When treatment is effective and followed as prescribed (taken daily without missing any doses), the amount of HIV in the body becomes so low that the HIV is undetectable by our standard blood tests. When HIV is undetectable, it is untransmittable (U=U).
 - This means that people living with HIV who have an undetectable viral load will not transmit HIV to sex partners, even without a condom.

How is HIV prevented?

- Getting HIV testing regularly.
- Using condoms during sex & discussing sex partner's status.
- Receiving tattoos and piercings from only certified professionals; tattoos and piercings done by friends can increase the risk of getting HIV.
- Using your own personal injection equipment (no sharing) and don't share anything that might have blood on it (razor blades,

toothbrushes, snorting straws).

- Using medications like **pre**-exposure prophylaxis (**PrEP**) or **post**-exposure prophylaxis (**PEP**) depending on your situation (more information below).

PrEP & PEP?

- **PrEP** (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a medication used to prevent HIV **before** possible transmission. It's used like a form of birth control for HIV and it's taken everyday. PrEP is available as a bi-monthly injection or a daily pill.
- **PEP** (post-exposure prophylaxis) is an emergency medication used to prevent HIV **after** possible transmission. If taken no more than 72 hours **after** HIV exposure it can prevent getting HIV. It's similar to the morning after pill, and PEP is available at hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent cares, and doctors offices.

Get Tested! (Know Your Status)

- HIV testing is the first step to knowing your status.
 - If you feel you may have been exposed to HIV, testing is recommended as soon as possible.
 - If you aren't sure, testing every 3 to 6 months is recommended.
 - Everyone should get tested at least once even if they think they've never been exposed to HIV.
- Low-cost, sliding scale, or free services could be around you. At-home, mail-based testing programs are available (more info. at nextdistro.org/hcvhiv).
- While you're getting HIV tested, get tested for Hep C (aka HCV) and other STIs.

Debunking Myths

1. **MYTH:** HIV can be transmitted by shaking hands, using the same toilet, coughing, or kissing.
TRUTH: HIV cannot be acquired by touch, air, water, saliva, sweat, tears, insects, pets, sharing food/drinks. It can only be transmitted by blood, semen, vaginal fluid, and breastmilk with a detectable viral load.
2. **MYTH:** Washing works or injection equipment (like syringes, filters, etc), with boiling water and soap can prevent HIV when sharing works.
TRUTH: Never share works or injection equipment (like cookers and cottons). If you **need to and don't have any other option**, bleach is the easiest way to kill HIV & HCV from surfaces.
3. **MYTH:** Condoms always protect against transmitting or acquiring HIV
TRUTH: When used consistently & correctly, most latex and non-latex condoms (internal or external) are 90-95% effective in reducing HIV transmission. Some types of non-latex condoms will only prevent pregnancy or certain STIs.
4. **MYTH:** Being "straight" prevents transmission of HIV
TRUTH: Sexual orientation or gender identity does not change the risk of HIV transmission. *Anyone* could get HIV through sharing syringes or having sex (anal or vaginal) without a condom with a person living