

Resource Article

HIV/AIDS

Janette Pepall

Many countries worldwide are struggling with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Children and teens affected by HIV/AIDS include those whose parents or other family members are ill with or have died from the disease and those who currently have the disease.

What Is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. It is found in the blood, semen, and vaginal fluid of a person who has HIV.

What Is AIDS?

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is the final stage of HIV, when the body's immune system has been damaged so much that the body is extremely vulnerable to other infections.

- *Acquired* means that AIDS cannot be passed easily from 1 person to another.
- *Immune Deficiency* means that the body's immune system is weakened.
- *Syndrome* refers to a range of diseases that may be associated with AIDS.

HIV causes AIDS. It may take 5–10 years for a person who is HIV positive to get AIDS. Nearly all HIV-infected people get AIDS.

Risks and Symptoms

Certain activities put you at risk for becoming infected with HIV. These include:

- Unprotected sex
- Injecting drugs and sharing equipment
- Receiving an unscreened blood transfusion
- Accidental exposure to HIV-infected blood (for example, a needle injury)
- Being born to a mother infected with HIV
- Being forced into unwanted sexual activity, including child rape, child prostitution, or child marriage

Symptoms of HIV include:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Extreme and constant tiredness
- Fevers, chills, and night sweats
- Rapid weight loss and lowered appetite
- Swollen lymph glands in the neck, underarms, and groin
- White spots or unusual marks in the mouth
- Skin marks or bumps (usually painless and purplish)
- Continuous coughing
- Diarrhoea

Important Facts about HIV/AIDS

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV/AIDS. There are some drugs that help with the symptoms. These must be taken for the rest of the person's life. For someone who is HIV positive, these drugs can delay the onset of AIDS.

The HIV virus cannot live outside of the body for very long. It can be killed by household bleach or soap and warm water.

HIV cannot be spread through ordinary social or family contact, such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing household items, or using unclean toilet seats.

Practical Strategies

There are ways you can prevent the spread of HIV and help those who have the disease.

- Train caregivers to safely care for children and teens infected with HIV/AIDS.
- Educate all children and teens about HIV/AIDS.
- Provide opportunities for children and teens who are infected with HIV to express their feelings, such as with art and play.
- Ensure that committed adults are available to give unconditional acceptance, love, and care to infected children and teens.
- Answer questions about HIV/AIDS in an honest and age-appropriate way.
- Develop a consistent routine to encourage children's and teens' sense of security and safety.
- Keep children and teens in school as long as possible.
- Ensure good health care and nutrition.
- Provide options for care, including youth hospices.
- Access community and government services where available.

Children and teens affected by HIV/AIDS have experienced loss. They may have feelings of fear, anxiety, and helplessness. They will require long-term support. Caregivers can play a major role in helping them look forward to a life of hope and joy, regardless of how long it will be.