

A guide for people with HIV infection / AIDS

BEING HIV **POSITIVE**

Satu Terbitan
KEMENTERIAN KESIHATAN MALAYSIA

"Kami Mementingkan Kesihatan Anda"

Being HIV POSITIVE

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What is AIDS?

AIDS is Acquired
Immune
Deficiency
Syndrome

AIDS is the end stage of a disease caused by a virus that attacks, weakens and subsequently breaks down the body's immune or defence system.

With this breakdown in the body's immune system, a person is vulnerable to:—

- various germs, including those which normally do not cause disease in normal human beings,
- several rare types of cancer.

The virus which causes AIDS is called the human immunodeficiency virus or HIV.

How is AIDS spread?

AIDS is spread from person to person when body fluids (blood, semen and vaginal secretions) containing the virus come into contact with another person's bloodstream. This most commonly occurs through sexual intercourse (anal and vaginal) in the same way as sexually transmitted diseases are transmitted, or through direct blood to blood contact such as when needles and syringes are shared as among dadah users.

The virus can also be spread from an infected mother to her child before, during or shortly after birth.

However, AIDS is **not transmitted** through routine casual contact such as holding hands, shaking hands, working together, playing games, sharing food and drinks, sneezing or coughing.

How does a person become infected with HIV?

It is not easy to become infected with the HIV. The virus is very fragile and cannot survive long outside the human body.

There are only 3 common ways in which the HIV can enter the body:—

- 1) through sexual intercourse with an infected person
- 2) through infected blood (for instance on needles or syringes) getting into one's blood
- 3) by infected mother to her child before, during or shortly after birth.

HIV from an infected person must enter living cells (such as the white blood cells) of another person in order to multiply and survive. HIV can only enter another person when the blood, semen or vaginal secretions of an infected person come into contact with the blood or mucous membranes of another person such as during sexual intercourse.

What happens when you become infected with HIV?

It is important to know that being infected with HIV does not mean having AIDS. This is because HIV infection does not immediately lead to AIDS in a person. So far not everyone infected with the virus has developed AIDS. There are several possibilities:—

- * The majority of infected people will develop antibodies to the virus yet remain healthy for many years. They will display none of the symptoms of AIDS. Research indicates that most people in this group can transmit the virus to others by sharing needles or intimate sexual contact. The long term effects of infection in healthy, antibody positive people are not known.
- * Another group of people who are also antibody positive will develop some of the symptoms of AIDS. These people are diagnosed as having an AIDS related condition (ARC). They may exhibit mild to severe symptoms such as swollen lymph nodes, unexplained persistent diarrhoea, unexplained weight loss, mild or intermittent fever, drenching night sweats, fatigue and/or yeast and fungus infection (candidiasis).
- * It is estimated that 50 per cent of those people who are antibody positive will eventually develop AIDS in 10 years. A diagnosis of AIDS is made only after finding specific life-threatening infections or cancers that do not normally occur in healthy people. The two most common illnesses associated with AIDS are Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), an infection of the lungs caused by a parasite and Kaposi's sarcoma (a rare form of skin cancer).

What is the HIV Antibody Test?

The HIV Antibody Test is a blood test which detects the presence of antibodies or marker, to HIV. The HIV antibody is a protein naturally produced in the body in response to an infection by the HIV.

The antibody screening test is important because it provides you with an early indication that you have been infected with the HIV. Early detection can help minimise the likelihood of developing an illness related to AIDS.

However you need to know that the antibody test is not a test for the disease AIDS – it does not tell you if you have AIDS. It will only show whether you have come into contact with the virus which may cause AIDS.

What will the Test tell me?

A **positive** test result shows that the antibody has been found in your blood. A **negative** test result shows that the antibody has not been detected in your blood.

If you have a Positive Test Result:

THIS MEANS:

- * Your blood sample has been tested more than once and the tests indicate that antibodies to HIV are present.
- * You have been infected by HIV and your body has produced antibodies.

- * You are infectious and capable of passing the virus on to others through your blood and semen/vaginal secretions.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN:

- * that you necessarily have AIDS or an AIDS – Related Condition (ARC)
- * that you are immune to AIDS
- * that you will necessarily develop AIDS

You can maximise your chances of staying healthy by avoiding further contact with the virus and other infections and maintaining a healthy lifestyle

When you first get your result

The first thing you will probably feel is shock. Even if you were fully aware of the test being done and of a risk of being positive, it can take a while to sink in.

You may also get depressed. Often, the greatest threat that the virus poses is the fear and uncertainty it creates. It can take **TIME** to get things into perspective.

You will probably want and need to talk about it. However, usually it is best not to tell anyone immediately and to think carefully about who you will tell. There's no rush.

It may also be that many problems and potential difficulties present themselves all at once. Again, give yourself **TIME**. Perhaps it will be a good idea to talk with someone to help go through it step by step. Any problem can seem impossible at the start but usually, after a while, things can be sorted out or faced up to.

Who to tell

You need only inform someone if it is important for them or helpful to you.

- * You must inform your GP or any DOCTOR who examines you, takes blood or gives treatment. If you are unwell, a doctor needs to know to avoid delay with appropriate treatment that may be needed.
- * You should inform your DENTIST before seeing him/her for treatment to ensure that proper precautions will be taken.

It is always better to inform someone personally.

As a general rule, it is important to give yourself TIME to think over who you want or need to tell and how you will say it. They may not understand it as well as you do. You may find it helpful to talk it over with someone beforehand.

Apart from exceptional circumstances, there is no need to inform your employer. If in doubt, please ask someone you trust.

What are the Rights of an HIV Infected Person?

A person who is tested positive for HIV is still regarded as a normal and useful person who should continue living meaningfully. He should participate fully and actively in all activities of life and contribute meaningfully to his work or profession, family and society.

The HIV infected person is free to travel. He/she has a right to continue holding his/her job as he/she does not pose a threat or problem to the health of others around him/her. He/she should continue to stay with the family and to interact fully with the family.

There is no basis for discriminating or isolating the HIV infected person. The HIV infected person has a right to live a normal and meaningful life in society.

What can you do to maximise your health and avoid infection by other organisms?

You need to take care of your health to enjoy a full and active life. You can improve your chances of staying healthy by having a healthy lifestyle such as:

- * get sufficient exercise, rest and sleep
- * avoiding dadah, cigarettes and alcohol
- * maintaining good nutrition
- * taking care of your personal hygiene
- * avoiding wounds, cuts and other injuries to your skin.
- * avoid getting/catching sexually transmitted diseases by using condoms and avoiding sex with people who have many sexual partners such as prostitutes
- * avoiding pregnancy
- * avoiding undue fatigue and stress
- * undergoing regular medical check-up, at least twice a year
- * if you become unwell or develop an infection, go and see your doctor as soon as possible.

What can you do to stop the spread of HIV to other people?

You have a responsibility to prevent spreading the HIV to others, especially your spouse, your sexual partner(s), fellow dadah users, family members and other people with whom you come into contact.

Besides caring for yourself, you need to care for others.

Don't transmit the virus. You need to:

- * refrain from donating blood, semen and body organs.
- * Use a condom each time you engage in sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal) to protect your partner from getting AIDS. Condoms can reduce the risk of spreading the AIDS virus if used correctly and consistently.
- * reduce the number of sexual partners, preferably to one, if you are used to having more than one partner.
- * stop using dadah if you are an addict. Do not inject dadah or share needles and syringes with other addicts.
- * refrain from getting pregnant if you are a woman. Your baby will face a high risk of getting infected.
- * avoid sharing your toothbrush and razor with others.
- * avoid shaving at barbers or hairdressers.

What Precautions to take at home

In general, normal standards of hygiene and cleanliness are sufficient. If you cut yourself, you should clean up any spilt blood yourself with paper towels. Surfaces which come into contact with your blood should be washed over with diluted household bleach (1 part bleach to 10 parts water).

To be absolutely safe, other body fluid spillages should be dealt with in the same way. Anyone helping you should wear rubber gloves - in case they have any cuts or breaks in the skin. If they get blood on themselves, they should wash it off with water.

If blood gets on clothes, a normal hot wash will be sufficient. For cuts and grazes, cover with a waterproof plaster. Used tissues, dressings, tampons etc should be flushed down the toilet, burnt or tied up in plastic bags. For sharp items such as used needles, razors, blades etc, put in a tin prior to disposal in a plastic bag.

Please note: Blood includes menstrual blood.

What not to worry about

1. There is no risk to you or to others from social contact and gestures of affection such as hugs, shaking hands, kissing on the cheek and just being close to people.
2. Sharing toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities at home or at work presents no cause for concern. It is perfectly adequate to follow normal standards of cleanliness.

3. The virus is not airborne and cannot be passed on through coughing and sneezing.
4. Insects such as mosquitoes and fleas cannot transmit the virus.

Note:

For more information, consult:

- . *Your doctor*
- . *Your local health department*
- . *Your local community AIDS organisation*

