

# HIV / AIDS

## FACT SHEET

### What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is the final and most serious stage of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) infection. It is a result of the destruction of the infected person's immune system.

- ◆ The immune system is the body's defense system. Cells of the immune system fight off infection and other diseases. If the immune system does not work well, you are at risk for serious and life-threatening infections and cancers. HIV attacks and destroys the disease-fighting cells, called CD4+T cells, of the immune system, leaving the body with a weakened defense against infections and cancer.
- ◆ It can take years for a person infected with HIV to reach this final stage. Having AIDS means that the virus has weakened the immune system to the point at which the body has a difficult time fighting infection. When a person infected with HIV has one or more specific infections, certain cancers, or a CD4+T cells count below 200, he or she is considered to have AIDS.

### How is HIV/AIDS Transmitted?

People can get HIV by coming in contact with HIV infected body fluids. This can happen with unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) with someone who is HIV infected. HIV can also be transmitted by sharing drug injection equipment with someone who is HIV infected or through pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding if the mother is HIV infected. HIV can also be spread through accidental needle sticks and though rare, through infected blood during blood transfusions.

### Symptoms of HIV / AIDS

Early signs can be: fever, headache, sore throat, swollen lymph glands and rash.

Later signs can be: swollen lymph glands, diarrhea, weight loss, fever, cough and shortness of breath.

### Diagnosis and Treatment of HIV/AIDS

Because people can be infected for many years without symptoms, the only way to know whether you are infected is to be tested. HIV is diagnosed by testing your blood or oral mucus for the presence of antibodies to the virus.

HIV treatment involves the use of anti-retroviral medications to keep an HIV infected person healthy. Treatment can help people at all stages of HIV disease. Although anti-HIV medications can treat HIV infection, they cannot cure HIV. HIV treatment is complicated and must be tailored to an individual's needs.

### How Can I Help Prevent the Spread of HIV/AIDS?

There is no vaccine to prevent HIV infection and no cure for HIV/AIDS. However, it is possible to protect yourself and others from infection.

- ◆ Know your HIV status. Everyone should get tested for HIV at least once and those at increased risk should get tested every year.
- ◆ If you are sexually active, use condoms correctly and consistently. Encourage your sexual partners to get tested for HIV.
- ◆ Do not inject drugs. If you do inject drugs, use clean needles and drug use equipment when injecting.
- ◆ Educate yourself about HIV and avoid behaviors that allow HIV infected fluids into your body (ie: blood, semen, vaginal secretions, breast milk).



**For more information, contact a Public Health Nurse at the City-County Health Department at 454-6950 or visit [www.cchdmt.org](http://www.cchdmt.org) or [www.cdc.gov/hiv](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv)**