

HIV/AIDS AWARENESS

HOW TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION

HIV is a major health concern worldwide. *It is estimated that there are currently 34 million people suffering from HIV and of this staggering number, 3.4 million are children under the age of 15* (WHO 2011 HIV Data). There are millions of newly infected people every year, with the hardest hit populations located in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southeast Asia. Many villages in Africa have been completely debilitated or wiped out from the disease, and many young children have been orphaned due to one or both parents dying from AIDS. HIV can be effectively managed if it is diagnosed early on and if medical treatment is promptly administered. It is important to be aware of the early symptoms of HIV and how to prevent the spread of the virus, in order to control the epidemic and insure that there are fewer and fewer cases of people newly infected with HIV.

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that weakens the body's immune system and destroys T-cells and CD4 cells. This leaves the immune system compromised and vulnerable to various opportunistic infections that can be fatal, such as Tuberculosis (which is a serious concern for persons infected with HIV).

HIV is the initial or early stage of the virus. If left untreated, HIV will eventually progress to AIDS. AIDS is the end stage of illness, and it is during this period that a person's body begins to break down and serious symptoms become evident.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HIV?

Once a person has been exposed to the HIV virus and has become infected, they may experience flu like symptoms 2-12 weeks after exposure. Since the symptoms of HIV are very similar to other illnesses, a definitive diagnosis can only be made from a blood test. The initial symptoms of HIV are:

- Fever
- Malaise
- Night sweats
- Diarrhea
- Headaches
- Joint pain
- Rash
- Swollen glands
- Weight loss
- Oral Candidiasis (yeast infection of the mouth commonly known as Thrush, which presents as a whitish, cottage cheese like texture on the tongue, and insides

of the cheeks)

These flu like symptoms generally only last for a short time (a few weeks at most). After that, a person infected with HIV may be completely asymptomatic for years. It is during this stage that a person is most likely to infect others with the virus, as they are highly contagious and may be unaware that they are infected. It is important to have yourself tested for HIV if you have experienced the above symptoms and have reason to believe you may have been exposed to HIV.

** Early diagnosis of HIV is key to effectively managing the disease and preventing the spread of infection.*

HOW IS HIV INFECTION SPREAD?

HIV is not contracted through casual contact with a person infected. It is not spread by sneezing, coughing, or even sharing eating utensils. In order for HIV to cause infection, the virus must enter a person's blood stream. The virus can be transmitted the following ways:

- Tainted blood transfusions
- Sharing needles for drug injections
- Unprotected sex with partners that may be infected
- Transmission from an HIV positive mother to child through the birthing process and breastfeeding

Children who have become infected with HIV are at a great risk for suffering from severe forms of common childhood illnesses such as Measles and Chicken Pox. Although these illnesses are usually not fatal in children with normal immune systems, they can cause death in a child suffering from HIV.

TREATMENT

Treatment for HIV consists of a regimen of anti-retroviral drugs. These drugs must be taken exactly as prescribed and for a person's entire life. If medical treatment is started early on, HIV can be managed and the progression to AIDS can be halted.

LINKS

The following links provide very detailed and helpful information on HIV/AIDS:

<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/patient-information-symptoms-of-hiv-infection-beyond-the-basics>

http://bodyandhealth.canada.com/channel_condition_info_details.asp?disease_id=1&channel_id=1020&relation_id=70907