



Living a Normal Life with HIV

Understanding HIV

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

HIV is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. It targets CD4 cells, which play a crucial role in maintaining normal immune function and in the body's response to fight infection. Infection with HIV results in a person becoming more vulnerable to infections as their immune system weakens.

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)

AIDS is used to describe the very late stages of untreated HIV infection. A person with AIDS typically presents with serious infections, usually only observed in severely immunocompromised individuals. Their immune system has become so weak that it can no longer fight off infections with which it would normally cope. With increased testing and advancing treatments, people with AIDS are seen less and less in the developed world.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread from person to person by blood and other bodily fluids (such as semen or vaginal secretions). Generally people living with HIV who are on effective treatment are unlikely to transmit HIV. The most common route of HIV transmission is through unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a person who has HIV and who is either not on effective treatment or is unaware they have HIV. HIV can also be transmitted through sharing of needles among those who inject drugs, and less commonly, from mother to child during pregnancy.

In Ireland, women are provided with HIV testing as part of their antenatal care to avoid transmission of HIV to their children. [Since 1985 all blood and blood products are screened for HIV, before this protocol was adopted a number of individuals acquired HIV after receiving HIV-positive blood transfusions. Accidental needlestick injuries also carry a risk of HIV transmission.

You cannot acquire HIV through ordinary contact with a person with HIV, such as hugging, shaking hands or touching, or from sharing food, towels, utensils, or telephones.

How common is HIV?

Numbers of people being diagnosed with HIV in Ireland have consistently risen since 2011. In 2016, the total number of diagnoses was 512 – which represents a 60% increase over the last 5 years. These 2016 figures demonstrate a notification rate of 11.2 per 100,000 population. But this is not a true reflection of all HIV infections in Ireland, as it is estimated that up to 30% of people with HIV remain undiagnosed and are unaware that they have HIV.

What are the symptoms of HIV?

Oftentimes, people who are diagnosed with HIV do not display any signs or symptoms at the time of diagnosis, and report never experiencing any symptoms of HIV infection in the past. People unaware of their HIV status can live for years without showing any signs or symptoms. During this time they can still pass on the HIV virus to other through unprotected sexual intercourse or sharing of needles.

Over time the immune system of a person who has HIV will become weaker and weaker, the rate of this process varies from person to person. The symptoms of advanced HIV infection also vary from person to person.





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Generally, after several years with HIV infection people may begin experiencing swelling of lymph nodes in the neck, armpit or groin. As the immune system becomes very weak they may experience gastrointestinal disturbance – stomach cramps, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, or weight loss.

If HIV infection is not diagnosed or treated, over time a person can progress to AIDS and become extremely unwell.

Incorporating HIV testing as part of regular health check-ups allows intervention at an early stage and generally prevents progression to AIDS. It also prevents people who are unaware they have HIV from unwittingly exposing their sexual partners to the virus.

How can I find out my HIV status?

The only way to know if you have HIV is to have a test. Those who are untested should not presume they are HIV negative, especially if they have ever engaged in risky activity. It is important to know your HIV status to protect you and your partner's health, especially if you have ever engaged in any unprotected sexual activity or you have ever injected drugs.

HIV is now considered a chronic illness that can be treated and well managed. Testing can allow a person to get the essential care necessary for living a long and healthy life with HIV. The earlier that HIV is detected, the less damage is done to the immune system and the more effective HIV medications can be in restoring normal immune function. Testing also reduces the risk of unknowingly transmitting HIV to sexual partners.

There are several methods of testing for HIV. Most common practice is to take a blood sample and send it to a lab for testing. It is also possible to test for HIV from samples of saliva, or pin-prick blood tests (similar to the method used by diabetics to check their sugars).

Everyone should consider testing for HIV if they do not know their status. This can be part of a regular health check-up. People might consider testing more frequently if concerned about an unprotected exposure

Where to get a HIV Test

Most GPs provide blood tests for HIV. Results usually take a few days

Mater Hospital Infectious Diseases Clinic Monday-Wednesday 1:45-6pm: appointment only

Testing is available in GUM Clinics throughout Ireland

St. James' Hospital, James' Street, Dublin 8 GUIDE clinic. Walk-in Mondays, Tuesdays & Thursdays (tickets allocated at 8am). Fridays by appointment only

KnowNow offer rapid testing in non-clinical settings in Dublin, Limerick & Cork. See www.knownow.ie for details

HIV Ireland, 70 Eccles Street, Dublin 7. Walk-in service on the 2nd and 4th Wednesday of the month from 1pm

Gay Men's Health Service offer testing at a variety of locations. See www.gmhs.ie for details





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How is HIV treated?

Although HIV cannot be cured, treatments are extremely effective and allow people with HIV to live normal lives. Modern treatment regimens are typically composed of one or two tablets per day, and as such are both convenient and discrete. HIV treatment is provided free of charge within the Irish healthcare setting

How can I prevent HIV transmission?

If you are HIV-negative you can avoid HIV acquisition by:

- Limiting risky behaviours that might expose you to HIV:
- Always using a condom in potentially risky sexual encounters
- Avoiding situations in which your judgement might be impaired – such as alcohol intoxication or drug use
- Avoiding injecting drug use
- Taking appropriate preventive measures (including PREP) if you are at risk of acquiring HIV

If you are HIV-positive, you can avoid HIV transmission to others by:

- Starting treatment for HIV as recommended by your doctor
- Attending regular appointments with your HIV-doctor to ensure that the virus is responding to treatment, and that your risk of transmission is minimised.
- If your viral load is detectable - using condoms in all sexual encounters and avoiding sharing of needles if injecting drugs

Life with HIV

With early diagnosis and effective treatment, people with HIV have similar life expectancies to those without HIV

Although there is not yet a cure for HIV it can be well managed with daily medication and most people living with HIV lead fit and active lives.

With effective antiretroviral treatment, people with HIV are unlikely to develop AIDS.

HIV Molecular Research Group

Established by Dr Paddy Mallon in 2008, the HMRG, is internationally recognized for its collaborative, translational research aimed at maintaining long term health in people living with HIV receiving antiretroviral therapy. Based at the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital campus, the group comprises researchers with laboratory, statistical and clinical research expertise.

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