

BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

HIV/AIDS RELATED QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What's the big deal about HIV and AIDS?

It's easy to think that AIDS and HIV are things for other people to worry about - gay people, drug users, people who sleep around. This is wrong - all teens, whoever they are, wherever they live need to take the threat of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, seriously. To be able to protect yourself, you need to know the facts, and know how to avoid becoming infected.

Isn't it only a problem for adults?

No. HIV is a big problem for young people, as well as adults. It is estimated that there were 2.5 million people under 15 living with HIV in 2009 and that one third of all new HIV infections are among people aged 15-24. Globally AIDS is the second most common cause of death among 20-24 year olds.

"I am 15 years old and my best friend who is a male has AIDS and we were really close so one night we experimented and after the fact that we "did it" he told me that he had AIDS."

What's the difference between HIV and AIDS?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV stands for the '*Human Immunodeficiency Virus*' and AIDS stands for the '*Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*'. AIDS is a serious condition that breaks down the body's defenses against illness. This means that people with AIDS can get many different kinds of diseases which a healthy person's body would normally fight off quite easily.

How long does it take for HIV to cause AIDS?

These days, there are many drugs (called antiretroviral drugs) that can be used to help people with HIV. People living with HIV can be treated for a very long time with antiretroviral drugs that prevent or delay the onset of AIDS. If someone infected with HIV does not take treatment, then it usually takes around ten years for AIDS to develop - however this varies from person to person. Many people around the world do not have access to antiretroviral treatment and therefore people continue to die from AIDS.

So how do you get infected with HIV?

HIV is passed on in the sexual fluids or blood of an infected person, so if infected blood or sexual fluid gets into your body, you can become infected. This usually happens by either having sexual intercourse with an infected person or by sharing needles used to inject drugs with an infected person. People can also be born with HIV if their mother is infected and a very small number of people become infected by having medical treatment using infected blood transfusions.

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HIV can't be caught by kissing, hugging or shaking hands with an infected person and it can't be transmitted by sneezes, door handles or dirty glasses.

What is 'safe sex'?

Usually when people talk about sex they mean sexual intercourse or 'penetrative sex' and this cannot be described as 'safe sex'. Safe sex means sexual activities, which you can do even if one person is infected with HIV, and they definitely won't pass it on to the other person. Lots of sexual activities are completely safe. You can kiss, cuddle, massage and rub each other's bodies. But if you have any cuts or sores on your skin, make sure they are covered with plasters (band-aids). Nothing you do on your own can cause you to get HIV - you can't get infected by masturbating.

What about using drugs?

The only way to be safe around drugs is not to take them. If you are on drugs you may take risks you normally wouldn't take, and you may have unsafe sex when you would normally be more careful. If you take drugs, you might find it more difficult to use a condom, or you might forget altogether. One of the most common drugs this can happen with is alcohol - if you're drunk, you might not always know what you're doing, or you might not care.

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If you inject drugs, you should always use a clean needle, syringe and spoon, water, etc each time you inject, and never share any of these with anyone else. If you snort drugs, and you use a note or a straw to snort through, you shouldn't share it with anyone else, as blood can be passed from the inside of one person's nose to another.

If you have a tattoo or a piercing, you should make sure that the needles and equipment used are sterile. Ask the staff at the place you have it done about what precautions they use.

What is safer sex?

Safer sex also means using a condom during sexual intercourse. Using a condom is not absolutely safe as condoms can break, but condoms can be effective if they are used correctly.

Oral sex (one person kissing, licking or sucking the sexual areas of another person) does carry some risk of infection. If a person performs oral sex on an infected man, for example, infected fluid could get into the mouth. The virus could then get into the blood if you have bleeding gums or tiny sores somewhere in the mouth. The same is true if infected sexual fluids from a woman get into the mouth of her partner. But infection from oral sex alone seems to be very rare.

Can you get infected your first time?

Yes, if your partner has HIV and you have unsafe sex, then you can become infected.

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Is there a cure?

There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. HIV is a virus, and no cure has been found for any type of virus. Recently, doctors have been able to control the virus once a person is infected, which means that a person with HIV can stay healthy for longer, but they have not managed to get rid of the virus in the body completely.

How can I tell if someone's infected with HIV?

There is no way to tell just by looking at someone whether they are infected with HIV. Someone can be infected but have no symptoms and still look perfectly healthy. They might also feel perfectly healthy and not know themselves that they are infected. The only way to know if a person is infected or not is if they have an HIV test.

How can I get tested?

You may find it helpful to talk to an adult - perhaps a parent, school nurse or teacher may be able to advise you where you can have a test. It's much better to talk to someone than to worry on your own. The clinic will suggest that you wait three months after your last risky sexual contact before having a test. This is because the virus is difficult to detect immediately after infection.

Will they tell my parents?

The clinics in different places have different policies. Most (but not all) clinics have a confidentiality policy, and will not tell anyone, although some places will want to bring a parent to give consent. You can phone the clinic before you go to find out.

What will they do?

Before they do anything, the doctor or nurse will ask if you're sure you want to have a test. They will usually take a sample of blood from you to examine. If you also want to be tested for STD's, they may take a urine sample, or they might ask if they can take a swab from the vagina or penis. Some places can give you the results on the same day, in other places you may have to wait for a week or more. While you wait, you shouldn't have sexual contact with anyone.

I have HIV - what should I do?

If you have found that you have HIV, you will need to tell the people who you have had sex with and anyone you have shared needles with so that they can decide if they want to have a test. This can be a very difficult thing to tell someone. If you think you can't tell them, your doctor or nurse may be able to help you. Your doctor at the clinic should also be able to give you more advice about how to stay healthy. They will also be able to tell you if you need to have any other blood tests done, and talk to you about medication.