WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS causes a breakdown in the body's immune system, leaving it vulnerable to infections which would not normally affect healthy people. The cause of AIDS is a virus known as HIV. (Also sometimes known as HTLV3). Only a small number of people infected with the virus have gone on to develop AIDS.

WHO IS AT RISK FROM AIDS?

Potentially all women and men are at risk from the AIDS virus, but so far the people who have HIV infection or AIDS fall into one of the following groups: gay or bisexual men; injecting drug users who share needles and/or syringes; haemophiliacs. A very small number of people with HIV or AIDS have received blood transfusions. The sexual partners of those in the high risk groups are also vulnerable. Contrary to popular opinion, lesbians are not a high risk group.

HOW IS AIDS TRANSMITTED?

AIDS is not easily transmitted. The virus is not contagious in the same way as, say measles or chickenpox. It is a blood borne virus, and is transmitted through body fluids. The virus dies quickly once it is outside the body.

HIV is passed on mainly through sexual contact, and cannot be caught by sharing cups, hugging, shaking hands or eating with a person with the virus or AIDS. It cannot be contracted from toilet seats or towels. In short – there is no risk from social or casual contact.

AIDS AND WOMEN

Although only a small number of women have so far been infected with HIV, this seems likely to increase in the future.

All women, whether they are heterosexual, lesbian or currently celibate, should be aware of the risks and ways to avoid contracting the virus.

The AIDS virus may be passed on to women in a variety of ways:





Sexual Transmission

Most women with AIDS or HIV infection have acquired it from having sex with a man who has been in contact with the virus. HIV can be transmitted in semen entering the vagina or rectum.

If a woman has cuts or sores in or around her mouth, there may be some risk from infected semen when having oral sex.

The vaginal secretions of infected women may contain the virus, but transmission from women to men is uncommon. It is thought that menstrual blood from women carrying the virus holds a greater risk.

There have been no reported cases of HIV transmissions in women due to lesbian sexual practices, but this does not mean that lesbians are immune.

The infected person may not have any symptoms of illness, so having sex with someone who appears well is not a safeguard, particularly if you are unsure of their sexual history.

Transmission Through Injecting Drugs

Women who inject drugs and who share needles and syringes are at risk of HIV (and other blood borne diseases). People may be infected with the AIDS virus and be able to pass it on without showing symptoms, so sharing needles and syringes with someone who seems to be healthy is not safe.

Transmission Through Artificial Insemination

In the past women who wanted to become pregnant through artificial insemination often asked gay men to donate sperm. Since it is known that semen may transmit the AIDS virus, women should be cautious about starting a pregnancy in this way.

Sperm donations from the high risk groups (gay or bisexual men; drug users; haemophiliacs) should be avoided.

For more information please read the "Reducing the Risk in Other Ways" section.

Transmission Through Blood Transfusion

Very few people in the UK have contracted the AIDS virus from blood transfusions. Blood banks now test donors, and any blood showing traces of HIV is discarded. Blood products given to haemophiliacs are now heat treated. (Heat kills the virus). It is extremely unlikely that the AIDS virus could be contracted in this way.

There has never been any risk in *giving* blood. All the equipment used is sterile, and only used once.

Transmission to Babies and Children

A small number of young children have been diagnosed as having HIV infection. These children were either born to mothers with HIV or AIDS, or were children who received blood transfusions.

Infected mothers may well give birth to infected babies. Since the virus is passed from mother to unborn child (probably through the placenta). Older children in the family are rarely at risk.



REDUCING THE RISK

All sexually active women, particularly partners of people in high risk groups, should know about safer sex. So, too, should women who are unsure of the sexual background of their partners. Many men who appear to be heterosexual may have had homosexual relationships in the past, so if in doubt – practice safer sex.

For sexual transmission to occur, body fluids containing HIV (especially blood or semen) must enter the partner's body through the vagina, rectum, mouth or breaks in the skin (e.g. cuts, grazes, ulcers, etc.). A condom should be used as a barrier in heterosexual lovemaking, for both vaginal and anal sex.

Do not rely on this as a method of birth control, but use some other form of contraception to avoid pregnancy.

Any sexual activity not involving penetration or exchange of body fluids is of low or no risk, assuming that the [illegible] does not have any cuts, grazes, sores, etc.

Any sexual practice which breaks the skin and mucosal surfaces will increase the risk, and for this reason anal intercourse is particularly dangerous as the rectum is easily damaged during sex.

Blood and semen are the main hazards, but all body fluids and products (e.g. urine, faeces) *may* contain an element of risk if they are exchanged frequently. Kissing is safe unless saliva contains blood (from bleeding gums or mouth ulcers). The risk is low unless the fluid contains blood.

Although woman to woman sex carries no observed risk at all, lesbians should be aware of safer sex, particularly if their partner uses injectable drugs, or is a bisexual woman in a relationship with a man in a high risk group, or was until recently in a heterosexual relationship with a man at risk.

Safer sex for women having relationships with men or women at risk

High Risk

Vaginal intercourse *without* using a condom.

Anal intercourse. (Using a *strong condom* and plenty of water-based lubricant reduces the risk.)

Any act which draws blood.

Any sexual practice which involves contact with urine or faeces.

Sharing sex toys (e.g. vibrators).

Sex during menstrual periods if partner has open cuts, grazes or sores on their hands or body.

Medium Risk

Oral sex by woman to man, even if he withdraws before orgasm.

Oral sex by woman to woman if active partner has bleeding gums, mouth ulcers, etc.

Oral sex by man to woman if he has broken skin in or around mouth.

Vaginal intercourse with condom

No Risk

Stimulation using hands, either mutually or solo.

General body contact, stroking, body kissing.

Orgasm of semen *onto* partners body.

Sex toys – providing they are not shared.

REDUCING THE RISK IN OTHER WAYS

Women Planning Donor Insemination

If you decide to have artificial insemination, screening of the potential donor should include a detailed medical, social and sexual history. Priority should be given to donors who have been in a monogamous relationship since before 1980. Even donors who have been tested negative (if they belong to a high risk group) may not be acceptable. If your chosen donor does not want to have a test for HIV antibodies, it is better to find someone else who will agree to the test.

Donors who use injectable drugs may be in poor health regardless of exposure to the AIDS virus, and should be avoided.

The main agencies who specialise in artificial insemination are now screening donors, but if you decide to consult a private doctor make sure they are also following this practice.

Women Who Use Injectable Drugs

Do not share needles, syringes or other equipment since this carries a very high risk of passing on the virus. It is also wise to follow the safer sex guidelines, particularly if your partner is injecting drugs and shares his/her works.

Women Planning Pregnancy

If you or your partner are in a high risk group, or if either of you have been diagnosed as having HIV, then it is best to avoid becoming pregnant. Likewise, if either of you are in a high risk group, and decide not to take the HIV test, then you should consider avoiding pregnancy. If you do become pregnant you might want to consider having an abortion as pregnancy increases the chances of an infected woman developing AIDS. Babies born to mothers with HIV are often infected too, and have a high chance of getting full AIDS.



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WOMEN WHO HAVE HIV OR AIDS

Taking care of yourself

People with HIV infection or AIDS often feel isolated. This may be because of the way misinformed people react to them, or the fear of how others might react. It can be difficult to decide who to tell and what to tell them, especially if you are feeling bad about yourself. Some people with the virus or AIDS shy away from social contact, and their feelings of isolation get worse.

It is important to remember that the HIV virus is only passed on when infected blood or semen gets into the bloodstream of another person. So it is safe to share rooms, buses, toilets, swimming pools, crockery and hugs.

Find someone you talk things over with. It's important to have someone you don't need to keep up appearances for. You might want to discuss a practical problem, or talk about your biggest fears. The Terrence Higgins Trust can put you in touch with other women in the same position as yourself, or arrange for someone to visit you. If you prefer – ask at your hospital. They may be able to help.

It's important to eat a properly balanced diet, and get enough rest and sleep. There is no reason why you should not continue with any sport you enjoy. Talk to your doctor if you are uncertain of what to eat or how much sleep to be aiming for.

Taking Care Of Others

Showing that you know about the simple precautions you need to take will help others to feel safe and keep their fears in proportion.

Normal standards of household cleanliness are sufficient. In fact, you need make very few changes to your existing routine. Our Medical Briefing booklet lists the precautions you need to take. There are a few additional measure of which women with HIV or AIDS need to be aware:

- Doctors disagree about the risk involved, so it's best not to breast-feed your child at the moment. Don't let this stop you hugging and kissing him/her though, as this presents no risk at all.
- Used sanitary towels and tampons should be flushed down the toilet, or put in a sealed plastic bag.

CHILDREN WITH HIV INFECTION OR AIDS

The Terrence Higgins Trust or the Haemophilia Society will be able to give you support and advice. Alternatively, ask your hospital social worker or STD Clinic Counsellor for help.

Your child can safely attend school, without putting other children at risk.

There are a few precautions which you need to take to protect yourself, your child and others in contact with him or her.

- When cleaning up faeces, urine or vomit (these may contain blood) cover any open cuts on your hands with waterproof plasters and wear disposable gloves.
- Dispose of dirty nappies by flushing down toilet, or put them in a sealed plastic bag. If you use terry nappies simply wash them on the hottest cycle of your own or a laundrette's washing machine.
- Do not breast feed your child.
- Cover any cuts or grazes on either yourself or your child with waterproof plasters.
- Hugs, cuddles and kisses are comforting and enjoyable for both child and parent – and quite safe.

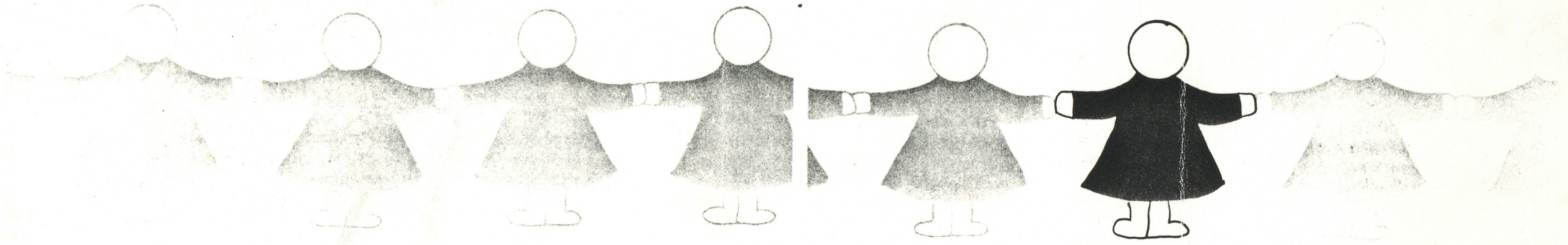
If Someone You Know Has Aids

Many women have relatives, friends or other loved ones with HIV infection or AIDS, or who are in high risk groups. Local AIDS organisations can often offer support, information and counselling for families, lovers and friends.

Women Are Doing AIDS Work

Some of the people providing AIDS related services, both paid and voluntary, are women. If the numbers of women with AIDS continues to rise, it will be even more important for women to be involved in this work.





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