

Top Questions About HIV Prevention and Women

The human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, is a virus that attacks the immune system. Without treatment, HIV leads to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). With AIDS, the immune system is too weak to fight off infections and some types of cancer. In the United States, about 1 in 4 people living with HIV is female. There is currently no cure for HIV. But you can take steps to prevent it.

Q: How can I prevent HIV?

A: The best way to prevent HIV is to not have sex or share needles at any time. Sharing needles for any reason is very risky.

Lower your risk of getting HIV from sex with the following steps:

- **Use condoms.** Male latex condoms are the most effective way to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when you have sex. Because a man does not need to ejaculate (come) to give or get some STIs, make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Female condoms can also help to prevent HIV infection. Other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.
- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for HIV and other STIs. Talk to each other about the test results before you have sex. Having an STI increases your chances of becoming infected with HIV during sex. If your partner has an STI in addition to HIV, that also increases your risk of HIV infection. If you have an STI, you should also get tested for HIV.

- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for HIV and other STIs. After being tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.
- **Limit your number of sexual partners.** Your risk of getting HIV and other STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Don't douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This may increase your risk of getting HIV and other STIs.
- **Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.** Alcohol or drug abuse may lead to risky behaviors such as sharing needles to inject drugs or not using a condom when you have sex.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from HIV or any type of STI.

Q: Can I get medicine to prevent HIV if I've been sexually assaulted?

A: Yes. If you've been sexually assaulted, get medical help right away. The hospital or clinic can give you medicine that can help keep you from getting HIV. This type of drug is called post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). PEP is medicine for people who may have been accidentally exposed to HIV.

Sexual assault puts you at risk for HIV because a man may not use a condom during sexual violence. Sexual assault is more likely to cause tears or cuts in your vagina or anus that allow easy entry of HIV. This is

especially true for girls and younger women, whose reproductive tracts are not fully developed.

Q: Can I take medicine to prevent HIV if my partner has HIV?

A: Yes. Talk to your doctor or nurse about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP is an HIV prevention medicine for people who do not have HIV but who may be at high risk. PrEP is a pill you take by mouth every day.

You may be at high risk for HIV if you:

- Are HIV-negative but your partner is HIV-positive.
- Are not in a monogamous relationship (you or

your partner also have sex with other people) and do not always use condoms.

- Inject illegal drugs or share needles

Q: How can I prevent HIV if I inject drugs?

A: Intravenous (IV) drug users who share needles are at high risk for HIV. Sharing needles can place another person's blood right into your body, even if the amount is so small that you can't see it on the needle.

Whenever you need to use a needle, be sure that it is sterilized. Do not share needles with anyone. You can also get HIV if the equipment used for body piercings and tattoos is not sterilized.

For more information...

For more information about HIV and AIDS, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

AIDS.gov

www.aids.gov

AIDSinfo

800-448-0440 • www.aidsinfo.nih.gov

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS

800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS

866-284-4107 • <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

American Sexual Health Association

800-227-8922 • www.ashastd.org

The Well Project

www.thewellproject.org

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Page last updated: December 14, 2016.

Content last reviewed: November 16, 2015.



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