

## AIDS FACT SHEET

### WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is caused by a virus called HTLV-III which infects and destroys specific cells of the immune system called T-helper cells. Without these cells, a person is open to infection by any virus or other disease that comes along. People do not actually die from AIDS; they die from one of these diseases to which the body no longer has any resistance. Some of these diseases are Kaposi's sarcoma (a form of cancer) and pneumocystis (a type of pneumonia).

It seems that some people can be exposed to the HTLV-III virus and not go on to develop AIDS. It is thought that there might be other factors which make certain people get AIDS when exposed to the virus and not others.

### SYMPTOMS

The first symptoms of AIDS are coughing, diarrhea, swollen lymph glands, yeast infection in the mouth, fever, rapid weight loss, fatigue, blueish or brownish spots on the skins. Later, more serious infections take hold.

### WHO IS AT RISK?

75% of all AIDS victims in North America are gay or bisexual men. Other people who are at risk are drug users who share needles, women sexual partners of bisexual men and children of women with AIDS (who can be born with AIDS or get it from breast milk). Hemophiliacs (people who bleed very easily) and other people who need blood transfusions have been known to get AIDS but that risk is now almost entirely eliminated because the Blood Bank now tests all blood for the HTLV-III virus.

### HOW IS AIDS TRANSMITTED?

AIDS is transmitted through blood, semen and urine, and therefore usually got through sexual contact. It can also be transmitted through sharing needles. The virus has been found in saliva but there is no evidence yet of it being passed on through saliva. It is not passed on by casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, etc. The virus is very fragile and large quantities are needed to pass it on.

## TESTING FOR AIDS

The blood test for AIDS tests for antibodies to the HTLV-III virus. A positive test (one which shows the antibodies) merely means that the person has been exposed to the virus. It does not diagnose AIDS. It does not tell if a person has AIDS, has been exposed to AIDS, or is a carrier. Only one to ten per cent of those who test positive will go on to develop symptoms of AIDS.

The test is not 100% accurate; people can be carrying the HTLV-III virus and test negative.

## WOMEN AND AIDS

Women are more likely to get AIDS from men than to give it to men. There is less risk of getting AIDS from vaginal intercourse than from anal intercourse, although it is possible. The vagina has much thicker tissue lining it than the rectum and there is less chance of damage to the tissue. Damaged tissue would allow the virus in the semen to enter the other person's blood.

It is possible but not easy for a woman to give AIDS to a man through vaginal secretions and menstrual fluid. There is a slight chance that if a woman had more than one sexual partner in a short time, one man's semen in her vagina could infect another man. It is therefore unfair to blame prostitutes for spreading AIDS when it is far more likely that prostitutes could get AIDS from bisexual men.

There has been one case reported so far of AIDS being transmitted sexually from one woman to another. This was in New York in 1985. The first of the women to get AIDS was an IV needle user.

A year ago, there were 11 women with AIDS in Canada and 530 in the U.S.A.

## SAFE SEX FOR WOMEN

The best way to avoid contact with semen is to use condoms.

Also, do not allow blood, semen, urine or feces to enter your body through your mouth, vagina, rectum or open cuts and sores.

Vancouver Women's Health Collective  
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