



What is AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus (HIV). It attacks our body defense system which normally helps fight off diseases and infections. And if this happens people may develop AIDS, the disease itself. They will become ill and die from illnesses their bodies cannot fight off anymore.

How do you become infected?

Because the virus is present in semen and vaginal fluid, it means one of the dangers comes through having sexual intercourse with an infected person; i.e. vaginal, anal, or oral sex. So the virus can be passed on from man to man, woman to woman, man to woman and woman to man. For those who inject drugs, there is the added risk from sharing needles or equipment with someone who is infected.

Finally, babies born to mothers who are infected have a high chance of being born with the virus if the mother doesn't take preventive drugs.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF FROM AIDS?

Most people who have the virus don't even know it. They may look and feel completely well. So you cannot know who is infected and who isn't.

To protect yourself follow these guidelines:

The more sexual partners you have, the more chances you have of having sex with someone who is infected. It is safest to stick to one faithful partner. Unless you are sure of your partner, always use a condom. This will reduce the risk of catching the virus.

Anyone who misuses drugs should not inject. If you ever do, never share equipment (needles, syringes, mixing bowls, etc.). You could be injecting the virus straight into your blood stream.

If you think you are infected

If you think you may be infected go to your family doctor for advice about having a test. Or go direct to a clinic for sexually transmitted diseases for confidential advice and a test if you wish. If you have the virus, they'll let you know and give you help and support.

What about things that pierce the skin?

It is not safe to use equipment for ear-piercing tattooing or acupuncture unless you know it is unused or has been sterilized. Nor is it 100% safe to share the toothbrush or razor of someone who is infected. They could give you the virus through infected blood.

What can't you catch the virus from?

The Government's clear medical advice is that you cannot get the AIDS virus from normal social contact with someone who is infected. You cannot get it from shaking hands. Nor is there any record of anyone becoming infected through kissing. There is no danger in sharing cups or cutlery. Nor can you catch it from public baths or toilets.

Giving blood is safe. All the equipment is only used once.

And all the blood used for blood transfusion is rigorously checked.