



## The Truth About HIV/AIDS

### Get the Facts...

AIDS—*acquired immunodeficiency syndrome*—is caused by HIV, the *human immunodeficiency virus*. HIV weakens your body's immune system, making it less able to fight against diseases and infections. HIV passes from one person to another through contact with the bodily fluids of someone infected with the virus. Most often, the virus spreads through oral, vaginal, or anal sex during which a condom is not used, or by sharing a needle. Mothers can pass the virus on to their babies during pregnancy or birth or by breast-feeding.

**It's not a "gay thing."** Heterosexual sex is the most common source of infection for females, and the second most common source for males.<sup>1</sup> And while more men than women contract HIV, women's rate of infection is increasing.<sup>2</sup>

**Using alcohol and drugs increases your risk for HIV infection.** Injection drug use is a leading cause of transmission; users contract the virus when they share needles and syringes with an infected person. In addition, alcohol and non-injection can affect your judgment and lower your inhibitions leading you to take risks you are less likely to take when sober, such as having unprotected sex. Any kind of drug use can contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS when users trade sex for drugs or when they engage in risky behaviors while under the influence of drugs.

### Before You Risk It...

**Get the facts.** Not having sexual intercourse is the most effective way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. For teens who choose to be sexually active, these prevention measures lower your risk of an HIV infection.

- Avoid alcohol and drugs. They use can cause you to make sexual choices you wouldn't make when sober.
- Only engage in sexual activity that does not involve vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- Have intercourse with only one uninfected partner.
- Use a latex condom every time you have sexual intercourse of any kind.

**Know the risks.** The majority of young people who have HIV are infected sexually. As more teens have become aware of the risk, fewer are having sex and more teens who are sexually active are using condoms.<sup>3</sup> The second most common source of HIV is intravenous drug use, but any activity where blood exchange is possible is risky. Teens should not share needles for any activity, including steroid drug injection, tattooing, or body piercing.<sup>4</sup>

**Stay informed.** While most people who have the disease now live much longer due to medical research and new drugs, there is no cure.

### Know the Signs...

**How can you tell if you or someone else may already have HIV?** If you have not had unprotected sex or shared a needle, it is very unlikely that you have HIV. The only way to know if you are infected is to be tested. The following may be warning signs of HIV infection:

- Weight loss
- Frequent fevers and sweats
- Lack of energy
- Swollen lymph glands in the armpits, groin, or neck
- Persistent skin rashes
- Severe herpes infections that cause mouth, genital, or anal sores
- Short-term memory loss

No one should assume they are infected if they have these symptoms. Any of these symptoms can be related to other illnesses. Again, the only way to find out if you are infected with HIV is to be tested.

### What can you do to help someone whose drug or alcohol use is putting them at risk for HIV/AIDS?

Be a real friend. You might even save a life. Encourage your friend to stop using substances or seek professional help. For information and referrals, call SAMHSA's Health Information Network at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727).

**For more information or for references to facts found in this *Tips for Teens*, go to [www.samhsa.gov/SHIN](http://www.samhsa.gov/SHIN).**