

This notice has been placed here to provide important health information for those who might not come across it otherwise, or those who might feel reluctant or embarrassed to seek it out or to read it in public. We apologize for intruding on your privacy, but accurate information will help protect us all.

A current myth you may have heard is that "no one knows anything about AIDS". That may have been true in 1981, when the disease first appeared, but since then we have had the opportunity to analyze 14,000 cases, and so we do know some things for sure. In particular, we know how AIDS is transmitted.

AIDS is transmitted in the following two ways:

1. By infected blood getting directly into the bloodstream. Risk groups for the blood-to-blood transmission route are:

- IV drug users sharing needles.
- Hemophiliacs and transfusion recipients through contaminated blood products. This is no longer a danger since the blood supply has been screened.
- Children of infected mothers exposed to blood during birth.
- People who have oral sex with infected women during menstruation. No cases of the 14,000 recorded have menstrual blood as a proven cause.

2. By infected semen getting directly into the bloodstream. Necessarily, the risk group for the semen-to-blood transmission route is people who have sex with infected men. Semen can enter the bloodstream:

- During anal intercourse, through tiny abrasions in the rectum.
- During oral sex, either by swallowing or through bleeding gums.
- During vaginal intercourse, through tiny abrasions in the vagina. Semen is far less likely to enter the blood through the vagina than through the rectum, since the lining of the vagina is sturdier.

Though there has been much hysteria about other bodily fluids, only blood and semen have caused AIDS. It is just barely possible that extended exchange of very large quantities of saliva (as in ten solid minutes of deep French kissing) could transmit the infection, but not one case of the 14,000 recorded has been proved to have saliva as a transmission route.

The following facts reassure us that AIDS cannot be transmitted any other way, particularly not by casual contact:

- The virus is extremely fragile, much more so than the viruses that cause colds or flus. It cannot live on inanimate objects. It dies the instant it gets dry and is instantly killed by ordinary soap-and-water or the chlorine used in swimming pools.
- Out of 14,000 cases, not one family member has gotten sick from hugging or kissing their loved one with AIDS. Not one of the people who shared housing, dishes, clothing and toilets everyday with a patient has ever gotten sick, except in the ways listed above.
- Out of the tens of thousands of health workers who have treated AIDS patients, not one has ever gotten AIDS from a patient. This is true despite the fact that many health workers have either accidentally pricked themselves with needles used by AIDS patients or been splashed with blood or other body fluids of patients.

If you are a man who has any sex at all with other men, or if you are an IV drug user, you **must** find out about the risk reduction guidelines, and practice safe sex with **all** your partners, male and female. It is no longer safe just to reduce the number of contacts you have, and it is criminally irresponsible not to protect your sexual partners.

If you are female, first of all, don't worry too much -- fewer than 1% of AIDS cases are women who got it through vaginal intercourse, and this percentage will not increase in future. To be safe, use condoms during intercourse with people whose sexual history or IV drug use history you aren't absolutely sure of. Condoms help with birth control too, so you can kill two birds with one stone.

If you are a man who has never had any sexual contact with other men, and you aren't an IV drug user, your chances of getting AIDS are basically zero. You can help by being considerate of the anxiety of your female partners if you are asked to wear a condom. Remember, there are other sexually transmitted diseases besides AIDS, and some of the most common (such as chlamydia) show no symptoms in women, but cause men quite a bit of pain. Condoms will protect you too.

For more information, call the GMHC AIDS Hotline at (212) 807-6016.