HIV/AIDS

What is it?
AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is a serious condition characterized by a weakened immunity against illness and disease. Tests for HIV/AIDS check for the presence of antibodies to the virus. The presence of antibodies suggests that the person has been exposed to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV, NOT that he or she has AIDS, or will necessarily develop AIDS in the future.

People who are diagnosed with AIDS are vulnerable to a variety of serious health problems, many of which are not normally fatal to persons with a healthy immune system. Most people diagnosed as having AIDS develop an unusual form of pneumonia, or a rare form of skin cancer, Kaposi's sarcoma (pronounced ca-po-sees) and/or other infections. A diagnosis of AIDS may also be made on the basis of evidence of brain involvement, indicated by a deterioration of the central nervous system.

More recently, recurrent yeast infections and invasive cervical cancer have been added to the list of conditions that constitute a case definition of AIDS. The affected individual must also test positive for HIV antibodies as part of the diagnosis.

How do you get it?
Most people with HIV or AIDS were probably exposed to the virus during sexual activity with an infected partner or by injecting the virus into their blood stream with a contaminated shared needle or syringe while taking intravenous drugs. It is believed that during sexual intercourse, vaginal secretions and semen carry the virus through a break in the skin or through a mucous membrane. Anal intercourse with an infected partner without using a condom is an extremely high-risk activity because of the opportunity for the virus to enter the blood stream through tears in the rectal tissue. Unprotected vaginal or oral intercourse is also risky. The use of condoms and/or latex dam barriers during oral, anal or vaginal intercourse is highly recommended as a means of reducing risk for those who are sexually active. Sharing infected needles used to inject drugs can spread the HIV virus rapidly. Small amounts of infected blood may be present in the needle that can then be injected into the next user's blood stream.

The spread of HIV disease through transfusions has decreased through the development of screening tests to detect antibodies to the HIV virus. Blood banks now test all donated blood and discard all units that test positive. Banking your own blood before elective surgery is another suggestion made by health professionals.

Children who have been diagnosed with AIDS have been born to mothers who have been infected with HIV through blood transfusions, intercourse or needle sharing. The virus can pass from the mother to the child through the placenta. Approximately 30% of all babies born to HIV-infected mothers will be infected themselves. Over the past several years, medical resources have identified the primary modes of transmission. Because research is ongoing, new details about HIV/AIDS and its transmission are constantly evolving.

Symptoms
AIDS is a syndrome, which means a group of signs and symptoms that occur together and characterize a particular health concern. A virus known as HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) causes it.

Initial symptoms of AIDS or HIV are similar to those of other less serious illnesses:
- persistent fatigue with no apparent cause
- swollen lymph glands that last for more than three months
- persistent unexplained fever
- unexplained weight loss of 10-15 pounds in less than two months
- shortness of breath
- heavy dry cough not due to smoking
- unexplained bleeding or bruising
- diarrhea for an extended period of time
• recurrent night sweats
• white patches in the mouth
• unexplained neurological symptoms

If your need is urgent, and the student health service is closed, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call 911 for an ambulance.

These symptoms may sound like the flu or a variety of other illnesses. Once you have assessed your personal health status and identify any of these symptoms as lasting over a prolonged period, see your doctor. Only a physician can tell whether or not you have AIDS. In the early stages of HIV infection, a person is likely to have no symptoms and may feel and look fine, although he or she will be capable of transmitting HIV to another person.

Being infected with HIV is considered a progressive disease -- first with no symptoms, then moving on to a symptomatic stage and finally ending in full-blown AIDS and possibly death. This progression often called "HIV disease" can take up to 15 years. In the past few years, new drugs and medication are helping to improve the prognosis and the quality of life for many people living with HIV/AIDS.

The HIV virus is carried in certain bodily fluids, especially blood, semen, and vaginal secretions. It can enter the body through mucous membranes such as the vagina, the urethra, the mouth; and through breaks in the skin. HIV is also found in breast milk and may be transmitted from an infected mother to her baby in-utero.

You cannot get HIV...
You cannot get HIV from a toilet seat, a sneeze, a handshake, or from eating foods prepared by an infected person or from other such casual contact.

Types of Antibody Tests
The Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) was developed for the purpose of screening blood for the blood bank system. For individuals requesting an HIV antibody blood test, one specimen of blood is drawn that is used for an ELISA. A second test, The Western Blot test which is considered more accurate but is more expensive, is used to confirm a positive ELISA.

The OraSure HIV-1&2 collection device is the only FDA approved sample collection device available that uses oral fluid to test for antibodies to the HIV-1&2 virus. A small device resembling a toothbrush is placed between the patient's lower cheek and gums for 2 minutes to collect cheek cells. The cells then are analyzed for the virus. The test screens cheek cells, not saliva.

Contact the student health services if you would like to be tested. You may also ask for confidential testing options.

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