**What is HIV/AIDS?**

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is the virus that can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Unlike some other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV. That means that once you have HIV, you have it for life.

HIV affects specific cells of the immune system, called CD4 cells, or T cells. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of these cells that the body can’t fight off infections and disease. When this happens, HIV infection leads to AIDS.

HIV disease has a well-documented progression. Untreated, HIV is almost universally fatal because it eventually overwhelms the immune system—resulting in acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). HIV treatment helps people at all stages of the disease, and treatment can slow or prevent progression from one stage to the next.

**AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome):** This is the stage of infection that occurs when your immune system is badly damaged and you become vulnerable to infections and infection-related cancers called opportunistic illnesses. When the number of your CD4 cells falls below 200 cells per cubic millimeter of blood (200 cells/mm3), you are considered to have progressed to AIDS. (Normal CD4 counts are between 500 and 1,600 cells/mm3.) You can also be diagnosed with AIDS if you develop one or more opportunistic illnesses, regardless of your CD4 count. Without treatment, people who are diagnosed with AIDS typically survive about 3 years. Once someone has a dangerous opportunistic illness, life expectancy without treatment falls to about 1 year. People with AIDS need medical treatment to prevent death.

**Mode of Transmission**

**In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by having sex or sharing injection drug equipment such as needles with someone who has HIV.**

Only certain fluids—blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk—from an HIV-infected person can transmit HIV. These fluids must come in contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue or be directly injected into the bloodstream (from a needle or syringe) for transmission to possibly occur. Mucous membranes can be found inside the rectum, the vagina, the opening of the penis, and the mouth.

**Signs and Symptoms**

The only way to know if you are infected with HIV is to be tested. You cannot rely on symptoms to know whether you have HIV. Many people who are infected with HIV **do not have any symptoms at all** for 10 years or more. Some people who are infected with HIV report having flu-like symptoms (often described as “the worst flu ever”) 2 to 4 weeks after exposure. Symptoms can include:

* Fever
* Enlarged lymph nodes
* Sore throat
* Rash

These symptoms can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks. During this time, HIV infection may not show up on an HIV test, but people who have it are highly infectious and can spread the infection to others.

However, you should not assume you have HIV if you have any of these symptoms. Each of these symptoms can be caused by other illnesses. Again, the only way to determine whether you are infected is to be tested for HIV infection.

**Cure?**

No safe and effective cure currently exists, but scientists are working hard to find one, and remain hopeful. Meanwhile, with proper medical care, HIV can be controlled. Treatment for HIV is often called antiretroviral therapy or ART. It can dramatically prolong the lives of many people infected with HIV and lower their chance of infecting others. Before the introduction of ART in the mid-1990s, people with HIV could progress to AIDS in just a few years. Today, someone diagnosed with HIV and treated before the disease is far advanced can have a nearly normal life expectancy.