

> What is HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a viral infection that attacks and causes damage to the immune system. Most HIV infection is contracted through unprotected sex because HIV is present in body fluids such as blood, semen and vaginal fluid. It can also be transmitted through sharing injecting drug equipment and from mother to child at birth or through breastfeeding (but this is rare in the UK because pregnant women are screened in early pregnancy).

At present there is no cure for HIV but there is effective medication called anti-retroviral therapy that controls the virus to such a level that it can't be detected in blood samples (known as undetectable). Immune function is therefore preserved and people don't become unwell. Well controlled HIV results in a normal life expectancy. Furthermore an undetectable viral load also means the virus can't be passed on during unprotected sex (undetectable = untransmittable or U=U).

> What are the symptoms?

Sometimes symptoms can occur just after being infected with HIV – this is called “primary HIV infection” or “sero-conversion” and at this time people can be highly infectious if they have unprotected sex. The symptoms of primary infection are similar to flu (fever, sore throat, rash). After sero-conversion has taken place, a person can be well and have no symptoms for a long time. This is a time when people with HIV can still be infectious to others and often remain undiagnosed.

> What are the complications?

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is the most advanced stage of HIV infection when the immune system can no longer fight infections.

Someone with AIDS has both HIV and at least one of a specific list of 'AIDS-defining' diseases that can cause severe illness. Usually people have had HIV for many years by the time this happens. Early diagnosis and effective anti-retroviral therapy stops this from happening.

> For more information:

HIV community nursing service – For advice and support about HIV in Bromley – 01689 86647

References: National aids trust: [Understanding HIV](#) | [National AIDS Trust](#), Sexual health Bromley: [Sexual Health Bromley - Free sexual health services in Bromley](#), HIV treatment & advocacy: [HIV i-Base](#), Positivity UK: [Homepage](#) | [Positively UK](#), Home STI testing: [Sexual Health London](#) • [SHL.UK](#), HIV & AIDS NHS: [HIV and AIDS - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

What can I do?**Getting tested**

The most important way we can prevent complications in HIV is to diagnose and treat people as soon as possible after they have become infected. Rates of HIV infection are very high in London and it is estimated about 1 in 12 people who have HIV do not yet know because they are untested. These days you can order an HIV test online, attend a sexual health clinic or ask your GP. Whilst it is sensible for everyone to have an HIV test, some communities are at increased risk of HIV and may need to test more regularly. Examples include, men who have sex with men and people whose background is from places with a high HIV prevalence such as Sub-Saharan Africa

Preventing HIV

There are a number of ways of preventing onward transmission of HIV.

- Effective condom use. Free condoms for at risk people can be accessed via [sexualhealthbromley](#) website.
- PrEP and PEPSE (pre and post exposure prophylaxis) – HIV medication can also be taken by an HIV negative person to prevent HIV acquisition via unprotected sex
- Needle exchange programmes organised through local pharmacies

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To contact Bromley Well call the Single Point of Access on **0808 278 7898** or direct Lifestyle Support lines **07985 431484 / 07985 444210** Email enquiry@bromleywell.org.uk www.bromleywell.org.uk



> Further resources

Understanding HIV Understanding HIV National AIDS Trust	Campaigns to raise awareness and for the rights of people living with HIV
Sexual health Bromley Sexual Health Bromley - Free sexual health services in Bromley	For information about local HIV and sexual health services, prevention and free condom schemes
HIV i-Base HIV i-Base	HIV treatment advice and advocacy - comprehensive details about anti-retroviral medication
Positively UK Homepage Positively UK	Focusses on peer support for people living with HIV
Sexual health London Sexual Health London • SHL.UK	Free home STI/HIV testing kits
NHS resources HIV and AIDS - NHS (www.nhs.uk)	Further information on HIV via the NHS.

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