

## What is HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a viral infection that attacks and damages the immune system. Most HIV infection is contracted through unprotected sex because HIV is present in bodily fluids such as blood, semen, anal mucus, 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 as pregnant women are screened in early pregnancy).

HIV can develop into AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), which comes in the late stages of HIV. This is when people with HIV also have a collection of illnesses due to their compromised immune system.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms are most likely to occur in the first 2-6 weeks – this period is called “primary HIV infection” or “sero-conversion” and at this time people can be highly infectious if they have unprotected sex. After sero-conversion, people can be symptomless but they can still be infectious to others. Symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Rash
- Joint and muscle pain
- Fatigue
- Swollen glands

## What can I do?

### GET 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. You can either order HIV test kits online via <https://www.shl.uk> or receive them through a sexual health clinic or your GP.

### USE PHYSICAL FORMS OF CONTRACEPTION

Free condoms for at-risk people can be accessed via <https://www.sexualhealthbromley.co.uk/>

**To register with Bromley Well:**  
**Freephone 0808 278 7898**  
**Or register online:**  
**[www.bromleywell.org.uk/refer](http://www.bromleywell.org.uk/refer)**

**Contact Lifestyle Support direct**  
**07985 431484 / 07985 444210**  
**or email**  
**[enquiry@bromleywell.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@bromleywell.org.uk)**

## What about treatment?

At present there is no cure for HIV but there is effective medication called anti-retroviral therapy that controls the virus to the point it can't be detected in blood samples. Immune function is therefore preserved, controlling HIV results in a normal life expectancy.

Furthermore, an undetectable viral load also means the virus can't be passed on during unprotected sex.



## Some myths

### **Myth 1: You only need to take your medication if you are feeling unwell**

Not true. Even if you are not having symptoms (you are asymptomatic), HIV can 'silently' cause damage to the immune system. Some of this damage is not reversible and can have long-term effects on your health. Taking your medication even when you feel healthy can prevent this damage even taking place.

## What can I do?

### **PrEP and PEPSE (PRE AND POST EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS)**

These treatments can also be taken by an HIV negative person to prevent HIV acquisition via unprotected sex.

### **NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES**

Needle exchange programmes are organised through local pharmacies and discourage the use of contaminated needles.

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# HIV

**Bromley**

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**HEALTH FACT SHEET**

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### **Myth 2: You can only get tested for HIV at the doctor**

Not true. There are a range of locations that can test for HIV for free. These include: clinics run by HIV charities, general sexual health clinics, and at-home testing kits. You can access an at-home testing kit here: <https://www.shl.uk>.

### **Myth 3: You can't live a normal life if you are diagnosed with HIV**

This is untrue, through early diagnosis and treatment there are less barriers for people with HIV to live long and healthy lives. By taking treatment, the viral load (the amount of the virus) will be reduced and reach undetectable levels. This means that you can't pass on the virus, to sexual partners or children.

### **Myth 4: HIV and AIDs are the same**

Not true, AIDS is late-stage or advanced HIV. You can't get an AIDS diagnosis unless you have already been diagnosed with HIV, but not all people with HIV will develop AIDS due to improvements in the management and treatment of HIV.

## **What can I do?**

### **TAKE CARE OF YOUR GENERAL HEALTH THROUGH NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Ensuring that you are taking care of your body by being physically active and eating a balanced diet not only supports your mental health but can also have benefits such as boosting your immunity. Some HIV medication can also increase cholesterol or risk of diabetes and so make sure you discuss side effects with your doctor.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

<b>HIV community nurse</b>  <b>Contact number 01689 86647</b>	Support and help from community nurses in Bromley.
<b>Terrence Higgins</b> <a href="https://www.tht.org.uk">https://www.tht.org.uk</a>  <b>Hepline 0808 802 1221</b>	Charity that provides support for people living with HIV through helplines, community groups, running HIV workshops, providing testing and campaigning for people with HIV.
<b>National AIDS trust</b>  <a href="https://www.nat.org.uk/about-hiv/understanding-hiv">https://www.nat.org.uk/about-hiv/understanding-hiv</a>	Charity that can provide financial, and social support for those living with HIV, they also work with healthcare professionals to keep practices up to date.
<b>Sexual Health Bromley</b> <a href="https://www.sexualhealthbromley.co.uk/">https://www.sexualhealthbromley.co.uk/</a>	For information about local HIV and sexual health services, prevention and free condom schemes.
<b>HIV i-base</b> <a href="https://i-base.info/">https://i-base.info/</a>	HIV treatment advice and advocacy – comprehensive details about anti-retroviral medication.
<b>Sexual Health London</b> <a href="https://www.shl.uk/">https://www.shl.uk/</a>	Free home STI/HIV testing.

**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](#), Home testing: [Sexual Health London • SHL.UK](#), HIV & AIDS NHS: [HIV and AIDS – NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

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