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# HIV BASICS

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## WHAT IS HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It's a virus that attacks the body's immune system making it difficult to fight off other illnesses.

When someone is first infected with HIV they normally experience a short illness within a few weeks such as a sore throat, fever or rash. Once this illness passes, no other symptoms may be experienced for many years. However, the virus is slowly damaging the immune system. Without treatment, HIV will damage the immune system to such a degree that the individual infected with HIV will develop AIDS.

## WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It's the name given to a collection of infections and cancers that, when present, indicate that the HIV virus has severely weakened someone's immune system to a life-threatening degree.

You cannot catch AIDS. HIV causes AIDS. It's only HIV that can be passed on.

## HOW IS HIV TRANSMITTED?

HIV is found in blood, genital fluids and breast milk. In Scotland, the two main ways that HIV is passed on are sex without a condom and through the sharing of drug-injecting equipment.

There is also a risk of transmission from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, birth or from breastfeeding. However, with HIV testing during pregnancy and medication to prevent mother to child transmission, it is now

very rare for a baby to be born with HIV in Scotland.

In other countries around the world, HIV can also be passed on during a blood transfusion or organ or sperm donation where HIV screening has not taken place. Screening for HIV has been in place in Scotland since 1985.

See the 'HIV Myths and Truths' Factsheet to find out how HIV is **not** passed on.

## CAN HIV BE TREATED?

HIV treatments are now available, which means that people living with HIV can expect a near normal life expectancy. Although there is currently no cure for HIV, research continues every day to improve treatments and ultimately develop an HIV vaccine and a cure.

