



Hiv  Aids

Life as HIV-positive



## **TO THE READER**

This brochure contains information on living with HIV.  
It has been created in collaboration with the HUS  
(Hospital District of Helsinki and Uusimaa) infectious diseases  
clinic and the Finnish AIDS Council.





## Why me?

People react very differently when they hear that they are HIV positive. Some blame themselves, others blame their partner or fate. It's important to understand that you are not infected with HIV because you "deserve it" or because you have acted immorally. It's possible that your partner did not know they were infected. So do not blame yourself or your partner. HIV will be your lifelong companion. The most important thing is to learn to live with it and adapt to the situation.



## Are HIV and AIDS the same thing?

HIV, or the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that damages the immune system of the infected person. The virus attacks certain white blood cells and destroys them. It can easily transform itself, which makes it difficult to destroy with medication. The immune system of HIV positive persons weakens little by little, and without proper medication they will be exposed to numerous different illnesses.

Without medication, the HIV infection can develop into AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). HIV and AIDS are not the same thing, and not everyone who has HIV progresses to AIDS. A person with AIDS has a significantly weakened immune system and contracts one of the opportunistic infections related to HIV, for instance, pneumonia, tuberculosis, meningitis, brain fever, retinitis or a fungal infection of the esophagus.



## How is HIV transmitted?

**The human immunodeficiency virus is not easily transmitted. The virus does not spread through air or surface contact: it requires contact of mucous membranes or blood to be transmitted.**

**Routes of HIV transmission include:**

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- unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with an HIV positive person
- unprotected oral sex with an HIV positive person (a person who gets vaginal discharge, semen or pre-seminal fluid in their mouth has the highest risk in practice)
- blood transfusion or organ transplant from an HIV-infected person (in Finland, donated blood and organs are tested)
- using a needle, syringe or other puncturing equipment that has been contaminated with HIV
- from mother to child during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding



## What is an HIV test?

An HIV infection is diagnosed with an HIV antibody test. The infection can be detected after 1-3 months of transmission. The test can be performed as a rapid test through a blood sample taken from either your fingertip or your arm. In Finland, the test can be taken in any healthcare unit, at the Finnish AIDS Council, at the Finnish Red Cross (SPR) and at some A-Clinic Foundation clinics.

If you have been involved in a situation with risk of infection, it's important that you take the test.

The infection should be diagnosed as early as possible, because then the treatment can be started in time. This means you can take care of not only your own health, but also your partner's.



## Can HIV be cured?

**Currently, there is no medication that can cure HIV.**

The HIV infection is a chronic disease that requires monitoring and treatment. HIV is treated with antiretroviral medication that usually includes three different antiviral medicines. The medication hinders the growth of the virus and prevents healthy cells from being infected. The medication allows the weakened immune system to recover, and the disease's progress can be stopped.

This means that the infection will not progress to the AIDS stage.

The medication is always started individually, based on an estimate made by a physician. The medication is life-long.

Thanks to the medication currently available, the viral loads of persons undergoing the AIDS stage can usually be lowered as well, and the opportunistic infections can be treated efficiently.

In order for the medicines to remain effective, they must be taken regularly in accordance with the given instructions. To ensure absorption and effectiveness, some medications should be taken with meals. If you forget to take a medication, it is normally better to take it late than to not take it at all. If HIV medication is taken with any other prescription drugs, over the counter drugs or vitamin products, it is important to consult your doctor on the compatibility of the products. HIV medication can increase the concentrations of certain other medications to toxic levels, and certain other medications may decrease the effectiveness of HIV medication.



## How long can I live with HIV?

The life expectancy of persons infected with HIV is nearly as high as the life expectancy of the rest of the population. This is due to the developments in the medical treatment.

Without medication, the average life expectancy of HIV positive persons is approximately 12 years.

After transmission, the development of an HIV infection depends on the time between transmission and diagnosis, medication, type of virus, the viral load transmitted, the immunity, age and possible other conditions of the infected, as well as numerous other factors.



## What does HIV treatment cost in Finland?

HIV medication costs approximately 15,000 Euro per year. In Finland, the place of domicile of the HIV positive person pays for the medication.



## How will HIV affect my life?

HIV will not affect your work, studies or hobbies. A person with HIV can date, get married and have children. HIV will not stop you from living a full life.

A healthy way of life is essential to those living with HIV, as it will help the immune system to remain strong. It's important to get enough sleep and exercise, and to eat healthily.

Like everybody else, the HIV positive should also avoid using alcohol and tobacco products.



## Work and studying

HIV infection will not stop you from working or studying. Everybody can make their own decision on whether to share information on their infection at work or school. HIV only forms an obstacle to working in some specific occupations. An HIV positive person can work as a nurse or a cook, for instance.

In accordance with UN recommendations, no HIV tests should be conducted as a part of a pre-employment examination, and the infection cannot be used as a basis for refusing to hire somebody. An employee should not be discriminated against in any way because of their HIV infection. Discrimination at work is against the law.



## Who should I tell?

The choice on sharing information on the infection is your own decision. Your sexual partners should always know about your infection, but there is no need to share it with others, such as family or friends, unless you wish to do so.

It may be a good idea to let at least one person close to you know about the infection. It's a significant issue, and receiving









support from those close to you can be important. It can feel difficult to tell people about being HIV positive. Help and support for this is available, for instance, at the Finnish AIDS Council.



## Should I inform healthcare personnel about my infection?

You should inform healthcare personnel about your infection. It's a good idea for a person with HIV to have a personal doctor at their health center or occupational health services for the treatment of other illnesses, like the HIV negative do. It's important that the physicians treating you know of your HIV medication, as this enables them to make sure that any possible additional medication is compatible with the HIV medication. All health care professionals, also those in occupational health care, work under a duty of confidentiality.

Some municipalities have their own dental care units for patients with hepatitis or HIV, but in most municipalities those with these infections are treated in the same units as all the other patients. It's also possible to use private dental care.



## How and when to tell my children?

There is no specific right time to tell your children about your infection. The right moment depends on the age of the child and the relationships within the family. It's important to share information on the infection in accordance with the development of the child, i.e. in very simple terms for small children.



Some HIV positive people do not want to tell their children about being infected. However, children are curious and may start asking questions on their parent's medications and doctor's appointments when they grow older. This is why being open and telling the children is often the best decision. Sharing the matter with a child can feel difficult. Support is available at the Finnish AIDS Council.



## Can I have sex?

Everybody has a right to a healthy and satisfactory sex life. Being HIV positive does not take this right away, so, yes, an HIV positive person can have sex. The important thing is to remember safety, meaning using a condom and taking your medications regularly.



## How do I protect my partner from the infection?

There are numerous ways to have sex, and the risk of HIV transmission is linked primarily to unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse. In addition, a small risk exists in unprotected oral sex. With regular medication, the HIV viral load in the body can be reduced to an undetectable level, making the risk of transmission nearly nonexistent.

When used correctly, condoms provide efficient protection against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. It's important to find the type of condom that suits yourself or your partner. You will only find it by experimenting. A condom that is too large may slip out of place. A condom that is too small

breaks more easily during use. Shops, online stores and pharmacies offer a wide range of condoms in different sizes, shapes and flavors.

Water or silicone based lubricant should be used with a condom. It will increase pleasure and help with keeping mucous membranes and the condom undamaged. When used correctly, a condom is the best and most reliable protection against HIV and other STDs during sex.

It's also important to be protected against HIV and other STDs during oral sex. A condom can be used as protection when performing oral sex on the penis. For oral sex performed on the vagina or the anus, a dental dam is a good choice for protection. Dental dams are available in shops.

**You can also turn a condom into a dental dam:** 1) Cut off the tip of the condom with scissors  
2) Put the scissors through the hole and cut the side of the condom 3) Roll out the condom into a rectangle 4) Place the rectangle (the dental dam) on the vagina or anus during oral sex

A risk of infection arises if the condom breaks or slips off during sex. If this occurs, taking preventive PEP medication is a possibility. Preventive medication is administered to the sexual partner of the HIV positive person with the aim of preventing the virus from being transmitted to the body of the HIV negative person. PEP medication is not an alternative to condoms and safe sex, and it is not a cure for HIV. PEP medication should be started as soon as possible, at latest after 48 hours from exposure. The decision on starting the medication is made by a doctor of infectious diseases. The medication is free of charge for the patient, but it cannot be bought over the counter. For more information on PEP medication, please consult the doctor of infectious diseases treating you.

## How to use a condom:

1.

Check the use-by date.



2.

Open the condom package carefully as shown in the picture. Check that you are unrolling the condom in the correct direction.



3.

Pull the foreskin back. Squeeze any air bubbles out of the condom's tip using your fingers. Roll the condom onto the erect penis. Never use two condoms at a time.



4.

Use water or silicone-based lubricant if necessary. This is particularly important in anal intercourse.



5.

Wear the condom for the whole duration of intercourse and never reuse condoms.

6.

Pull the penis out immediately after ejaculation. Hold onto the condom when you are pulling out so that it will not slip off, causing semen to enter your partner.



7.

Dispose of the condom with household waste. Do not flush the condom down the toilet.









## Will other STDs affect the transmission of HIV during unprotected sex?

Many STDs, like herpes, gonorrhea or syphilis, may increase the viral load of a person with HIV. This increases the risk of HIV transmission during unprotected sex.

If the HIV negative partner carries some other STD, the risk of HIV transmission is higher.



## Can I have children?

HIV does not pose any limits to having children; people with HIV can have a family as well as any others. The hopes and rights that the HIV positive have concerning having a family are not different from the HIV negative. When planning pregnancy, it's important to address the issue early on with a doctor of infectious diseases.

The medication of an HIV positive fertile woman should always be designed to account for the possibility of pregnancy. If the woman is HIV positive and the man is not, one way of performing the conception is “insemination at home”, in which the semen is taken to the vagina from a cup or a condom using a syringe during ovulation. This way, the woman can become pregnant without exposing the man to the possibility of infection.

If the man is HIV positive and the woman is not, the conception can be achieved through intercourse. The risk of transmission can be lowered efficiently if the man is taking HIV medication. The medication lowers the viral load in the semen. The risk can also be lowered by offering the HIV

negative woman preventive medication when trying to get pregnant. The baby cannot be infected if the woman is not infected.

Internationally, one possibility is sperm washing. Sperm washing is not currently performed in Finland, but the Family Federation of Finland will help you to find the services abroad at your own expense.

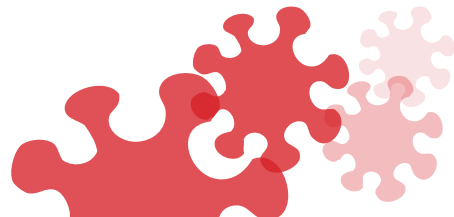


## Rights and responsibilities

Everybody is responsible for their own actions, also in sexual relations. The legislation on sharing information on your HIV infection, exposing others to the risk of HIV and transmitting HIV vary in different countries. The person with HIV should always inform their partner of their infection before sex in order to allow the partner to make a conscious choice on the matter.

In accordance with an interpretation of the Criminal Code in Finland, a person with HIV infection must tell his or her sexual partner about the infection before sexual contact. Using a condom does not remove this obligation. The interpretation of the law may change in the near future.

Being HIV positive will not affect your possibilities of acquiring a residence permit in Finland. This means a residence permit will not be granted or refused on the basis of factors relating to HIV.





## Where to look for help and support?

### THE FINNISH AIDS COUNCIL

The AIDS Council is a professional organization that works to prevent HIV infections. The council offers services to people who have been infected with HIV, people close to those infected, and those who worry about being infected. Low threshold services offered by the AIDS Council include rapid HIV testing and advice by phone or online. You can take an HIV test at any Council location by reserving an appointment by phone.

- The phone service operates Mon-Thu from 10.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., tel. +358 20 7465 705
- The online service is available at [www.aidsCouncil.fi](http://www.aidsCouncil.fi) / [www.hivtukikeskus.fi](http://www.hivtukikeskus.fi)

The AIDS Council also offers crisis and support discussions and peer support. All AIDS Council services are free of charge, anonymous and confidential. The services are available in Finnish, Russian, Somali and English. Interpreters can be used at the customer's request.

AIDS Council offices are located in Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Oulu.

### PEER SUPPORT GROUP AND ADAPTATION TRAINING COURSES AT THE AIDS COUNCIL

The peer support group and adaptation training courses offer an opportunity of meeting other HIV-infected people and people close to them. For more information on the group and the courses, please contact the AIDS Council.

## **OTHER ORGANIZATIONS:**

- Peer support and interest protection organization for the HIV positive and their close ones, and a patient organization for HIV-infected people and those living with AIDS.  
Positiiviset ry+358 9692 5441, [www.positiiviset.fi](http://www.positiiviset.fi)
- The Finnish Red Cross (SPR) HIV advice line +358 2032 7000  
Mon–Thu between 5.00 p.m and 8.00 p.m.
- The Finnish Red Cross Pluspiste locations in Jyväskylä, Joensuu, Kuopio and Seinäjoki
- Helsinki Deaconess Institute HIV services (Munkkisaarencatu 16 00150 Helsinki)  
and mobile health counseling unit, +358 50 502 7582

## Dictionary

**HIV viral load** = the HIV viral load indicates the amount of viruses in one milliliter of blood at the moment of measuring. In unprotected sex, the risk of HIV transmission is linked to the amount of viruses currently in the blood. When the viral load is low, the risk of HIV infection is also smaller.

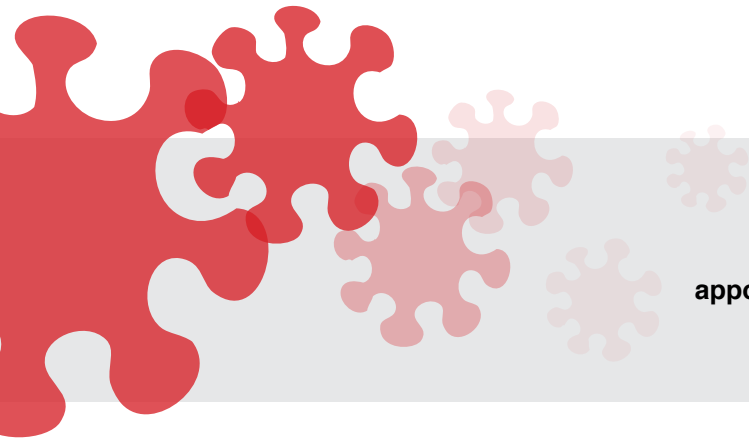
**Risk situation** = A risk situation is a situation involving the possibility of HIV or another STD being transmitted; for instance, intercourse or oral sex without using a condom, or being exposed to infected blood.

**Rapid test** = With rapid HIV testing, the results can be received in 1-20 minutes, depending on the test used. The test is based on HIV antibodies (HivAb) or antigens and antibodies (HivAgAb). A negative result from a rapid HIV test is completely reliable after three months from the possible transmission situation.

**Antibody** = The diagnosis of an HIV infection is usually based on detecting HIV antibodies. The body starts to produce antibodies to HIV soon after being infected. The antibodies can be detected in the blood at latest after three months from the transmission.

**CD4-cell** = T4 cell (the helper cell) regulates the immune system by recognizing foreign bodies and helping other lymphocytes to destroy pathogens. It's the CD4 cells that HIV attacks. The number of CD4 cells in the body, along with other laboratory test results, can be used to determine how the HIV infection is progressing.

**PCR** = Polymerase Chain Reaction is a method for determining the amount of HIV genetic material, i.e. the number of viruses, in the blood. This test method is used before starting medication, in monitoring the medication and to determine the existence of any virus populations resistant to medication. The method is vital in monitoring the effectiveness of HIV medication. In special cases, PCR tests can be used for diagnosing HIV.



**HIV FOUNDATION**

Unioninkatu 45 K, 00170 Helsinki

**AIDS Council information line and  
appointment booking for HIV tests** +358 207 465 705

(Mon-Thu, 10.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.)

**[www.hivtukikeskus.fi](http://www.hivtukikeskus.fi) [www.aidsCouncil.fi](http://www.aidsCouncil.fi)**

