

Opportunistic Infections

People with healthy immune systems can be exposed to certain viruses, bacteria, or parasites and have no reaction to them—but people living with HIV/AIDS can face serious health threats from what are known as “*opportunistic*” infections (OIs). These infections are called “opportunistic” because they take advantage of your weakened immune system, and they can cause devastating illnesses. OIs can be relatively localized (meaning they affect only one part of the body) or systemic or *disseminated* (meaning they affect many parts of the body).



Whether and when you become susceptible to OIs is often related to your CD4 count.

CD4 count is the name of a lab test that measures the health of your immune system. OIs are signs of a declining immune system. Most life-threatening OIs occur when your *CD4 count* is below 200 cells/mm. OIs are the most common cause of death for people with HIV/AIDS.

There are more than 20 OIs that are considered *AIDS-defining conditions*—if you have HIV and one or more of these OIs, you will be diagnosed with AIDS, no matter what your CD4 count happens to be. The names of some AIDS-defining conditions may be familiar but most are

not because they do not often occur in people with normal immune systems.

Here are some of the better known opportunistic infections:

- *Yeast Infection (Candidiasis)* of the esophagus or lungs
- *Invasive cervical cancer*
- *Kaposi's sarcoma*
- *Lymphoma, many types*
- *Tuberculosis*
- *Pneumocystis pneumonia*
- *Pneumonia, repeated episodes*



Because they can be so dangerous to your health, it is essential that you understand the signs, symptoms, prevention, and management of OIs.

Can I Prevent Opportunistic Infections?

One of the goals of HIV treatment is to lower your risk of getting OIs.

Antiretroviral therapy can help by increasing your number of CD4 cells, which will help protect you from OIs. You may also take medications to prevent disease from occurring (this is known as *prophylaxis*).



Be sure to get answers to any questions you have about HIV/AIDS. Your public health department and health care provider can help.

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