

HIV/AIDS – What is it?

What is HIV?

“Human Immunodeficiency Virus” is a very tiny virus, like the viruses that cause the “flu” or the common cold. However, HIV is different from other viruses because the immune system can never fully get rid of it. The virus hides in the immune system and other cells in the body. HIV causes a lot of damage to the immune system, leaving it open to other dangerous infections. HIV infection can lead to AIDS.



What is AIDS?

“Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome” is the final stage of HIV infection. People



at this stage of HIV disease are at risk for *opportunistic infections*.

Opportunistic infections are what someone can get when their immune system cannot

protect them very well and so these infections have the “opportunity” to make them sick. When someone has certain kinds of infections, certain types of cancers, or a very low number of immune system cells (called T-cells), the person is considered to have AIDS. A person with AIDS requires treatment to prevent death.

Where did HIV/AIDS come from?

Scientists believe HIV came from a chimpanzee in Western Africa. Humans probably came in contact with HIV-infected blood through hunting and eating these animals. HIV then spread to other parts of the world. In the early 1980s some young gay men in the United States and Europe were found to have a type of cancer, *Kaposi’s sarcoma*. Before this, Kaposi’s sarcoma was mainly found only among older men of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern descent, or among people living in Equatorial Africa. Also, healthcare providers began seeing cases of *Pneumocystis pneumonia*, a disease which is rare in people with normal immune systems.



Both of diseases were a sign that these patients’ immune systems were severely weakened. Research showed that this immune system damage was caused by HIV.

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

Text adapted from materials on the AIDS.gov website.
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