

HIV/AIDS

Since the beginning of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the population and the media have mostly used the term “AIDS”. It’s important to understand the difference between HIV and AIDS.

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) attacks the body’s immune system, that is, the cells that help the body fight infections. Without treatment, people who have the virus can be more vulnerable to some infections and diseases. With available treatments, people living with HIV now have a normal life expectancy.

AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) develops when HIV infection is not treated. The immune system is then very weak. The person can develop certain illnesses that can lead to death, if not treated. Available treatments can prevent these complications.

In Montréal, many people are living with HIV but don’t know it. It is estimated that this is the case for 14% of them.

Getting tested is the only way to find out if someone is living with HIV.

To find out if you should get an HIV test, talk to a nurse or doctor. These professionals can answer your questions and discuss the prevention options with you.

[To find out where you can get tested in Montréal](#)

Modes of transmission

HIV is transmitted most often

- Through anal or vaginal sexual relations without a condom (except if the person living with HIV is taking effective medications and has a low or undetectable viral load)
- By sharing needles (for people who inject drugs)
- During pregnancy or delivery, if the mother who is living with HIV is not on treatment.

HIV CANNOT be transmitted

- Through casual physical contact (e.g. touching, kissing, shaking hands)
- By sharing food or utensils (e.g. fork, spoon, knife, glass)
- Through doorknobs or toilets.

Prevention

There are many effective ways to prevent HIV transmission:

- **Treatment:** eliminates sexual transmission when viral load (amount of virus in the blood) is low or undetectable
- **Condom use:** reduces the risk of spreading or contracting the virus and other sexually transmitted infections like gonorrhoea, chlamydia and syphilis
- **Regular testing:** lets you know if you’re living with HIV and get appropriate prevention tips
- **PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis):** effectively prevents HIV infection in people who are not living with HIV, as long as the treatment is taken as prescribed. [For more information](#)

- **PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis):** when taken within 72 hours following exposure to HIV, this emergency treatment reduces the risk of infection. PEP is available in most hospital emergency rooms, and in some CLSCs and specialized clinics

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Treatment

The treatments for HIV/AIDS, called antiretroviral medications, have changed a lot since the 1980s. They are now very effective and cause fewer side effects than older treatments.

The treatments must be taken for the rest of a person's life. These medications allow people living with HIV to have similar quality of life and life expectancy as the population as a whole.

Treatments also reduce and control the amount of virus in the blood (viral load). A person will usually see the viral load go down quickly when taking the treatment as prescribed. **People with low or undetectable viral loads do not transmit VIH to their sex partners, even if they have sex without a condom.**

People at Risk

In Montréal, some communities are more vulnerable to HIV. More than 9 in 10 newly diagnosed people are from one of the 3 following communities:

- Men who have sex with men
- People from countries where HIV is endemic
- People who use injection drugs