

HIV / What Staff Need To Know



SDF
Scottish Drugs
Forum

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Brief Information

There has been an increase in the rate of HIV diagnoses in people who inject drugs in Glasgow. In 2015 there were 45 new cases. Previously the number of newly diagnosed cases of HIV in this population was lower, averaging 10 per year.

The increase in HIV has highlighted the need to raise awareness of HIV amongst people who inject drugs. This resource aims to support frontline staff and people who engage with those who use drugs to better understand HIV, including how to support people who may be at risk or who have recently been diagnosed with HIV.

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (more commonly known as HIV) is a blood borne virus which attacks the immune system and weakens the body's ability to fight infection and disease. There is no cure for HIV, but very effective treatment is now available. With early diagnosis and engagement in treatment a person with HIV can live a healthy life and enjoy a similar life expectancy to the rest of the population.

HIV is found in body fluids: blood, semen, vaginal and anal fluids and breast milk.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is a virus and has to get into your bloodstream to cause infection. HIV is most commonly transmitted by:

- Vaginal or anal sex without using a condom
- Sharing needles and syringes
- Sharing water, spoons, filters and other paraphernalia used to inject drugs
- From a HIV positive mother to her child during pregnancy, birth or by breast feeding
- From receiving contaminated blood/blood products

You cannot catch HIV from:

- Sweat
- Urine
- Sneezing or coughing
- Social contact such as sharing food, sharing cooking or eating utensils, kissing, shaking hands, or hugging, massage, or using the same toilet.
- Being in the same place as someone with HIV, or by sharing household items such like crockery, cutlery or bed linen.

How can HIV be transmitted via injecting drug use?

- Direct sharing of injecting equipment – needles and syringes
- Through sharing or reusing flush water
- Via sharing or reuse of other paraphernalia such as spoons and filters

By sharing we mean direct sharing between people injecting drugs, and the re-use of injecting equipment and paraphernalia used by another person.

It is important to recognise that in the right conditions HIV can survive outside the body for a number of weeks.

How can I support people who are at risk?

The main message is:

Ever injected? Get an HIV test.

There are four key things that should be communicated to individuals who are at risk of HIV transmission

- The best way to avoid HIV transmission (and other blood borne viruses) is to stop injecting drugs
- If you continue to inject – do not share any equipment used to prepare or take drugs
- Always use a condom for sex
- Get tested

What do HIV tests involve?

Pre-test counselling is no longer required. All that is needed is a discussion to check people understand what they are being tested for, when results will be available and how to contact them with the results.

Testing is available in a range of healthcare settings and you should familiarise yourself with those that offer testing in your area (HIV Scotland offer a service finders on their website – www.hivscotland.com).

Some services offer dry blood spot testing (DBST) which is a finger-prick test, other services use a venous blood sample.

DBST – A few drops of blood are smeared on a card that is then sent to a laboratory for processing. Results take longer than venous blood samples.

Venous blood samples – Most NHS services use a venous blood sample – a small sample of blood that is usually taken from an arm, which is then sent away to a laboratory for testing. Results will be communicated in line with the services usual timeframe.

With both DBST and venous blood samples – speak to the person taking the sample to find out when results will be available.

Treatment

There is no cure for HIV; however, there are new and very effective treatments available that control the virus. This means that people can live long and healthy lives if they are diagnosed early and adhere to their treatment.

Most people start treatment as soon as they are diagnosed. The earlier someone starts treatment after being infected with HIV the better their outcome will be.

Engaging in treatment can also stop the onward spread of HIV. This is known as Treatment as Prevention – HIV treatment reduces the individual's viral load and, with successful treatment, they are unlikely to pass on the virus to others.

Full Resource Information

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (more commonly known as HIV) is a blood borne virus which attacks the immune system and weakens the body's ability to fight infection and disease. HIV was identified in the 1980s; it used to be considered a terminal illness but advances in treatment mean that it is possible to live a long and healthy life with HIV and have a similar life expectancy as the rest of the population. The treatment works by reducing the amount of HIV virus (viral load) in the body.

HIV is found in body fluids: blood, semen, vaginal and anal fluids and breast milk.

“AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection, when your body can no longer fight life-threatening infections. With early diagnosis and effective treatment, most people with HIV will not go on to develop AIDS”

(NHS Choices)

How is HIV Transmitted?

HIV is a virus which can be found in the following bodily fluids: blood, semen, vaginal and anal fluids and breast milk. Transmission can occur when infected bodily fluids reach the blood stream of a person who does not have HIV.

HIV is most commonly transmitted by:

- > Vaginal or anal sex without using a condom
- > Sharing needles and syringes
- > Sharing water, spoons, filters and other paraphernalia used to inject drugs
- > From a HIV positive mother to her child during pregnancy, birth or by breast feeding
- > From receiving contaminated blood/ blood products

You cannot catch HIV from:

- > Sweat
- > Urine
- > Sneezing or coughing
- > Social contact such as sharing food, sharing cooking or eating utensils, kissing, shaking hands or hugging, massage, using the same toilet.
- > Being in the same place as someone with HIV, or by sharing household items such like crockery, cutlery or bed linen.

How can HIV be transmitted via injecting drug use?

- > Direct sharing of injecting equipment
- > Through sharing or reusing flush water
- > Via sharing of paraphernalia such as spoons and filters

By sharing we mean direct sharing between people injecting drugs, and the re-use of injecting equipment and paraphernalia used by another person.

It is important to recognise that in the right conditions HIV can survive outside the body for a number of weeks.

Signs and Symptoms of HIV

The only way to know if a person has HIV is to get a test.

Most people who are infected with HIV experience a short, flu-like illness that occurs two to six weeks after infection. This is also known as seroconversion illness and can last for 1-2 weeks. However in some people the illness is so mild that it passes without much notice or is mistaken for something else. This is because the most common symptoms are fever (raised temperature), sore throat, body rash, tiredness, joint and muscle pain and swollen glands.

After these initial symptoms disappear, HIV often does not cause any further symptoms for several years, perhaps as long as 10-15 years.

During this period, known as asymptomatic HIV infection, the person will feel well but the virus continues to be active and causes progressive damage to the immune system. Eventually as the immune system is weakened, people might present with a variety of health issues.

HIV can be transmitted to others during this time. Most HIV transmission takes place before the person has been diagnosed with HIV and has started treatment.

Having a HIV test is the only way to know if a person has HIV.

What do tests involve?

Pre-test counselling is no longer required. All that is needed is a discussion to check people understand what they are being tested for, when results will be available and how to contact them.

Testing is available in a range of health care settings and you should familiarise yourself with those that offer this in your area. Local services can be found on the HIV Scotland website using their service finder tool.

HIV Scotland: www.hivscotland.com

Some services offer dry blood spot testing (DBST) which is a finger-prick test other services use a venous blood sample.

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With both DBST and venous blood samples - speak to the person taking the sample to find out when results will be available.

Treatment

Why get treatment?

There is no cure for HIV; however, there are very effective treatments that control the virus. The earlier someone is diagnosed and starts HIV treatment, the less damage will be done to the immune system and therefore the better their health in future years.

This means that people can live long and healthy lives with treatment.

Most people get commenced on treatment as soon as they are diagnosed. Unlike Hepatitis C, where people might not start treatment until they meet a certain set of criteria, most people diagnosed with HIV start treatment immediately, regardless of the stage of their infection.

Engaging in treatment can also stop the onward spread of HIV. This is known as Treatment as Prevention. HIV treatment reduces the individual's viral load and, with successful treatment, they are unlikely to pass on the virus to others.

What is the treatment?

Treatment is known as antiretroviral medication or HAART (Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy) or Combination Drug Therapy. There are three different classes of HIV drug and each one works against HIV in a different way. The three classes of drugs are: Nucleoside/nucleotide reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs), Non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) and Protease Inhibitors (PIs).

NRTIs and NNRTIs are drugs which target a substance that HIV uses to infect immune system cells. PIs attack an enzyme in HIV.

There are now more than 20 of these drugs. Most people take a combination that includes two NRTIs and either an NNRTI or a protease inhibitor some of which might be combined into one pill. Most HIV treatment combinations are taken once or twice daily. This treatment has a very powerful anti-HIV effect. Thanks to HIV treatment, many people with the virus can live a long and healthy life.

Support should be offered to enable people to engage with testing and ongoing treatment.

How can I support people who are at risk?

The main message is: Ever injected? Get an HIV test.

There are four key things that should be communicated to individuals who are at risk of HIV transmission

- > The best way to avoid HIV transmission (or other blood borne viruses) is to stop injecting drugs. Support should be given encouraging alternatives to injecting such as smoking or commencing on opiate replacement therapy. Individuals should also be directed to where they can access foil.
- > If you continue to inject – do not share any equipment used to prepare or take drugs. Support should emphasise the importance of using a new set of sterile injecting equipment for every injection. Sharing is not just about needles: people sharing other equipment are also at risk, so reinforce messages about using new equipment for every injecting episode. This includes spoons, filters and unopened water for injection. Information should be given on where to get new injecting equipment.
If it is known that people are reusing then support should be given on the cleaning of injecting equipment. It should be emphasised that a person should never clean and re-use equipment previously used by someone else. If they are going to reuse then they should clean and reuse equipment only used by themselves.
- > Always use a condom for sex. Unprotected anal and vaginal sex is the most common way that people get HIV. Condoms should be used for anal, vaginal or oral sex as they provide excellent protection against HIV transmission. Staff should direct clients to where they can access free condoms. Unprotected sex is also a reason to go for a HIV test, regardless of injecting history
- > Get tested. People can be HIV positive for a number of years before they develop any symptoms. Getting a test is the only way to find out whether a person is HIV positive.

Individuals should be given support to understand the different tests available, where to access testing and as well as where to get further support following a positive or negative result. People who inject drugs should be encouraged to get tested for HIV regularly.

It is recognised that some people will find it difficult to engage with HIV treatment, for a variety of reasons. If you or your service is working with a person who is HIV positive consider how you could provide support and discuss this with them. It may involve making yourself familiar with local treatment centres and the staff within them. Treatment centres welcome such support which, with the permission of the patient, could include attendance at clinic appointments.

Further Information and Useful Links

HIV Scotland: www.hivscotland.com

AIDS Map: www.aidsmap.com

Scottish Drugs Forum: www.sdf.org.uk

Hepatitis Scotland: www.hepatitisscotland.org.uk

Scottish Needle Exchange Directory:
www.sdf.org.uk/index.php?cID=747

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions/HIV

Find drug services in your area: www.scottishdrugservices.com

Free Condoms: Free condoms are available in every health board area. For more information please go to your health board's website.

Charitable Status

Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF) is a company limited by guarantee, registration no. 106295 with charitable status and is also a registered Scottish charity, registered SC008077



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