AIDS
(Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)

AIDS is a severe viral infection caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). This virus destroys a person's resistance to disease and certain cancers. It is transmitted through blood, blood products, and body fluids. Although the fear of AIDS has grown faster than the epidemic, it is important to note that AIDS is not spread by casual contact and is easily killed by hot water, soap, bleach, and most antiseptics.

HOW THE AIDS INFECTION WORKS

Once HIV enters the body it affects T-helper (T-4) lymphocytes. These are white blood cells that are crucial for the immune system. Once they become infected, they become factories for producing the AIDS Virus. Eventually these infected T-4 cells die. This leaves the victim susceptible to infection and certain cancers.

While anyone can get AIDS, you are unlikely to get this disease unless you indulge in high-risk behavior. Some of these high-risk behaviors are promiscuous sex, having close relationships with HIV-positive people, and the sharing of needles. This illness was initially more common in homosexual men, but as time progresses, it will most probably affect an equal number of men and women. Babies born to women who are infected, have greater chances of getting AIDS.

Infection with HIV may cause a brief, mild illness with fever several weeks after contact. More serious symptoms do not develop until months or years later, so a person can be infected with the virus without showing any symptoms at all. At this stage of the infection there is no way of knowing you are infected unless you have a blood or mouth scraping test for the AIDS virus.

SYMPTOMS

- Fevers, night sweats, general weakness, enlarged lymph nodes.
- Chest pain, pneumonia, chronic cough, shortness of breath.
- Weight loss, diarrhea, difficulty swallowing, rectal problems.
- Headaches, personality changes, problems with vision and memory.
- Skin tumors (patchy dark areas) and infections.

There is no cure or vaccine for AIDS at the present time. Anti-viral antibiotic drugs have been shown to stop the virus from multiplying, which helps prolong health. The best treatment against AIDS is prevention. If you have been infected with HIV, careful medical follow-up with regular blood tests is necessary.

Do not take part in risky behaviors. These include sharing needles and syringes or other sharp instruments like razors with others, having unprotected sex with high-risk people (homosexuals, bisexuals, or prostitutes), and engaging in anal sex (with or without a condom).

For further information about AIDS, please call your caregiver, the health department, or the Center for Disease Control: 800-342-AIDS.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT AIDS

- You can not get AIDS through casual contact. This includes sitting next to an AIDS infected person, being coughed on, living with, swimming with, eating food prepared by, sitting or lying next to someone with AIDS.
- It is not caught from toilet seats, from showers, bath tubs, water fountains, phones, drinking glasses, or food touched or used by people with AIDS. Casual kissing will probably not transmit the disease. "French kissing" (putting one's tongue in another's mouth) is probably not a good idea as the AIDS Virus is present

in saliva.

- You will not get AIDS by donating blood. The needles used by blood banks are sterile and disposable.
- There is no evidence that AIDS is transmitted through tears.
- AIDS is not caught through mosquitoes.
- Children with AIDS will not pass AIDS to other children in school without exchange of blood products or engaging in sex. In school, a child with AIDS is actually at greater risk because of their weak immune status. Their susceptibility to the viruses and germs (*bacteria*) carried by children without AIDS is great.

TESTING FOR AIDS

- An ELISA (enzyme-linked immunoabsorbent assay) is a blood test available to let you know if you have contracted AIDS. If this test is positive, it is usually repeated.
- If positive a second time, a second test known as the Western blot test is performed. If the Western blot test is positive, it means you have been infected with HIV.

PREVENTION OF AIDS

- The best way to prevent AIDS is to avoid high-risk behavior.
- The outlook for defeating AIDS is good. Millions of research dollars are being spent on creating a vaccine to prevent the disease as well as providing a cure. New drugs appear to be extremely effective at controlling the disease.
- Your caregiver will educate you in all the most effective and current treatments.

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