HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes HIV infection. AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is the most advanced stage of HIV infection.

HIV attacks cells of the immune system and without treatment can gradually destroy the immune system and advance to AIDS.

**What are the symptoms?**

Soon after infection with HIV, some people have flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, or rash. The symptoms may come and go for a month or two after infection.

After this earliest stage, HIV continues to multiply but at very low levels. More severe symptoms of infection, such as chronic diarrhea, rapid weight loss, and signs of other infections and infection-related cancers, don’t usually appear for many years. Without treatment, the interval from HIV diagnosis to AIDS may vary from 9 months to 12 years or longer.

**How is it diagnosed?**

Blood tests are the most common way to diagnose if someone has the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

AIDS is diagnosed in an HIV-positive person when one or more of 25 specific diseases develop that are due to that person’s immune deficiency.

**How is HIV spread?**

HIV is spread through contact with certain body fluids from a person infected with HIV. These body fluids include: blood, semen, vaginal fluids, rectal fluids, breast milk. HIV can be transferred from an HIV-infected woman to her child during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding.

In New Zealand HIV is spread mainly by having sex with or sharing drug injection equipment with someone who is infected with HIV. The most common way children become infected with HIV is by mother-to-child transmission.

**HIV is not spread:**

- by shaking hands or hugging a person infected with HIV;
- from contact with objects used by a person with HIV such as dishes, toilet seats, or doorknobs;
- through the air; or
- through mosquito, tick, or other insect bites.

HIV transmission is possible at any stage of HIV infection—even if an HIV-infected person has no symptoms.

**What is the treatment for HIV?**

HIV is treated with daily antiretroviral therapy (ART). The drugs prevent HIV from multiplying and reduce the amount of HIV in the body and the risk of transmission.

They can be given to HIV-infected women during pregnancy and childbirth and to their babies after birth. They reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

ART doesn’t cure HIV, but it can help infected people live longer, healthier lives.

Adapted from AIDS info from the US Department of Health and Human Services.
Information adapted from the New Zealand Heart Foundation. Image sourced from http://rheumaticfever.health.govt.nz/.

Contact Community and Public Health for more information:

Phone 03 364 1777  Fax: 03 379 6484  Web: www.cph.co.nz