

Frequently Asked Questions about HIV, Pregnancy & Babies

What is HIV & how is it transmitted?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that affects the immune system. The immune system protects people from bacteria, viruses, infections, and cancers. HIV may be transmitted from a person who has the virus to another person through contact with their body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal and anal secretions and breast milk). Transmission may occur when body fluids have contact with a point of entry (i.e. mucous membranes or open wound). The virus needs an entry into the body. *HIV is NOT transmitted in saliva, tears, or urine. HIV is not transmitted by hugging, kissing, changing diapers, sharing bathroom, or other day-to-day activities!*

Is there a cure for HIV?

No, HIV is not a curable infection. However, with modern medicine and advances in care it is now considered a *manageable illness if proper care & treatment is accessed* (the earlier, the better). If HIV is not found early and/or not treated, the virus will cause the immune system to become weak. A weak immune system may lead to multiple infections and cancers that people would normally not get. Sometimes this can lead to death. This stage of the illness is referred to as AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). Today people can live long and healthy lives with proper care.

How is HIV managed?

There are healthcare providers that work in this area who will help support and care for those with HIV. There are specialized medications called antiretrovirals (or ARVs) that can control the virus. Once the virus is controlled, the immune system has a better chance of remaining strong. Staying healthy also requires regular appointments, blood work, teaching, support, and medications.

Is HIV transmission preventable?

Yes! Some main examples of prevention include:

- **Safer Sexual Contact**: use of barrier precautions (i.e., condoms, dental dams) with all types of sexual contact, including oral sex.
- **Safer Drug Use**: use of new drug equipment (i.e. needles, spoons, water) and not sharing any of this equipment.
- **Standard Precautions**: use of standard precautions if contact with body fluids is expected or actual (i.e., gloves), and cleaning up spills of blood or other body fluids with a fresh mixture of household bleach (1 part) and water (9 parts). Paper towels should be used and disposed of in a plastic garbage bag (*Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange, 2010*).
- **Testing**: Getting tested on a regular basis is important and knowing if you have HIV is the most powerful thing you can do to reduce the spread of HIV.

If a woman is HIV+ and pregnant, is the baby guaranteed to get the virus?

No, the baby is NOT guaranteed to get HIV! Pregnant women with HIV may pass the virus to the baby during pregnancy, birth, or through breastfeeding. *However, if the pregnant woman takes HIV medications during pregnancy to lower the amount of virus in her blood, it reduces the baby's chances of getting the infection. Without HIV treatment there is a 20-30% transmission risk to the baby. With treatment in pregnancy and during labour and delivery, the risk is reduced to 1-2%.*

Why does the baby receive HIV medications? Does that mean he/she is HIV positive?

The baby receives HIV medications as soon as possible after birth and for the first 6 weeks of life because they have been exposed to HIV. *Repeated HIV testing may be required to confirm if the*

baby is HIV-negative or HIV-positive. Since babies can't be tested for HIV until they are older (see below) this medication will help reduce the amount of virus in the baby if some of the virus was passed onto to the baby.

Is there HIV testing for babies? Yes!

Information about HIV tests for babies:

For babies, the viral load test detects and measures the amount of HIV in the baby's blood to diagnose or rule-out HIV infection.

The first test is done 48 hours or more following birth (before discharge from hospital) and further testing will be arranged after discharge. If two viral load tests are positive, the HIV care provider can be highly certain that the baby is infected with HIV. An HIV antibody test (Western Blot) cannot be used in young babies, but can be used for infants over 15 months old. This is the test used for adults who are testing for HIV. This test is booked for the baby when he/she is 18 months of age.

Can an HIV+ woman breastfeed?

Breastfeeding is not recommended. There is a risk of passing along HIV to the infant through breast milk even if the mother is on antiretrovirals and has an undetectable viral load. Until they are one year of age, infants born to women living with HIV are eligible to receive free formula through the Saskatchewan Infant Formula Program.

Immunizations:

- Babies who are HIV+ **can receive** the following vaccines as per the Saskatchewan routine childhood immunization schedule unless the attending physician notes otherwise:
 - DTaP-IPV-Hib (Diphtheria, Tetanus, acellular Pertussis, inactivated Polio & *Haemophilus influenza* type b) at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age;
 - Pneumococcal conjugate 13 at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age;
 - Meningococcal conjugate C at 12 months of age.
 - Influenza vaccine at 6 months of age and then every year afterwards.
 - NOTE – The attending physician may also order:
 - Men-C-ACYW-135 given at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age;
 - Hepatitis B at birth, 1, 2 and 6 months of age;
 - Meningococcal B at 2, 4, 6, and 18 months of age; and
 - Hepatitis A at 12 and 18 months of age.
- The baby's attending physician **will assess** if the baby can get the rotavirus vaccine as a young infant.
- The baby's attending physician will assess if the baby can get the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) and chickenpox (varicella) vaccines when they are over 1 year of age.

For more information, go to: <http://www.ehealthsask.ca/services/manuals/Documents/sim-chapter7.pdf>

Adapted from:

Positive Living Program
Royal University Hospital
Box 67, 103 Hospital Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0W8
Phone: 306.655.1783
Fax:306.655.0614



Regina Infectious Disease Specialists
4E Regina General Hospital
1440 14th Avenue
Regina, SK S4P 0W5
Phone: 306.766.3915
Fax: 306.766.3995