



State of Illinois  
Illinois Department of Public Health

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# KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT YOUR SEXUAL HEALTH

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**A**s you begin your life together, it is a good time to think about your health and the health of your partner. Seeing your doctor for a checkup is an important first step.

This is the time to assess your risk of disease spread through sexual activity, particularly infection with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as syphilis, gonorrhea or chlamydia.

Preventing the spread of HIV and STDs requires a personal commitment from each of us. That means learning about the causes of HIV and STDs to prevent their spread. It means recognizing if you have practiced behaviors that put you at risk of HIV infection or STDs. It means deciding what measures you should take to protect your partner. This commitment becomes even more crucial if you're thinking about having children.

Couples who are sexually faithful and have not shared needles to inject drugs are not likely to get HIV or STDs. Remember, however, that many persons who have HIV or STDs because of past activity may not know they are infected. That's why it's important that you and your partner talk frankly about your medical, sexual and social experiences before you get married or enter into a civil union.

This issue is so important, in fact, that Illinois law requires all persons applying for a marriage or civil union license at the county clerk's office receive this brochure.

We urge you to read this information carefully and discuss it with your partner. If you have additional questions, consult your physician or local health department. Or, you may call the Illinois Department of Public Health's HIV/AIDS & STD hotline, 1-800-243-2437.

Take the time now to think about these important issues.

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## **WHAT IS HIV?**

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). HIV weakens the body's immune system and reduces its ability to fight off infections and disease. If you are infected with HIV, your immune system is unable to defend against some types of cancers and other illnesses. There are treatments and drugs available that may delay the onset of AIDS and protect an HIV-infected person from developing some life-threatening conditions, but there is no cure for AIDS. In Illinois, more than 53 percent of the persons with AIDS have died.

## **HOW DOES SOMEONE GET HIV?**

Both men and women can become infected with HIV, and infect someone else, in several ways:

- Having sexual intercourse with someone infected with HIV. HIV is found in the semen, blood and vaginal secretions of infected persons and can be passed during unprotected sexual intercourse — anal, vaginal or oral.
- Sharing needles or syringes to inject drugs with someone who has HIV. Some persons share needles to inject or "shoot up" illegal drugs. In doing so, they also share small amounts of blood. If that blood is infected with HIV, the next users of the syringe may inject the virus directly into their bloodstream.
- From an HIV-infected mother to her child either before or during birth. An HIV-infected man can pass the virus to his partner and they can pass it to their unborn baby. Or a woman who is HIV infected can give it to both her partner and her baby. The baby can become infected with HIV before birth, during birth or while breastfeeding. If a woman has shared intravenous needles or has had sex with a partner whose sexual history is unknown, she should see a doctor or other health professional before becoming pregnant.

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- *Receiving a blood transfusion or blood products infected with HIV.* Today, there is little chance of getting HIV this way because, since 1985, donated blood and blood products have been carefully screened for HIV. However, persons who received a blood transfusion between 1977 and 1985 may unknowingly have received contaminated blood.

### **AM I AT RISK?**

HIV is spread through certain high-risk behaviors. Those at greatest risk are—

- Men who have sex with other men
- Persons who have more than one sex partner or who don't know their partner's sexual history
- Persons who share needles or syringes to inject drugs
- Sex partners of persons who practice or have practiced the above behaviors.

If you're one of these persons, you may have HIV and not know it. You can appear healthy and still spread HIV to your partner and your unborn children.

### **SHOULD I GET AN HIV TEST?**

In Illinois, neither a blood test nor a medical examination is required to obtain a marriage or a civil union license. However, if you think you are at risk of HIV infection, don't take chances. Be tested to see if you have HIV. This test can be performed by a licensed physician or at a state funded HIV antibody counseling and testing centers. At these centers, counseling and testing are provided anonymously and free of charge. For the location of the center nearest you, or for additional information about HIV/AIDS or STDs, call the Illinois Department of Public Health's toll-free hotline, 1-800-243-2437.

### **WHAT IF I TEST POSITIVE FOR HIV?**

A confirmed positive test means you have been infected with HIV. Being infected means the virus is in your body for the rest of your life. Therefore, you can infect others if you engage in behaviors that can transmit HIV. HIV weakens your body's immune system. This means that HIV infection can make your body more vulnerable to other illnesses and infections. Without treatment, most persons with HIV infection will develop AIDS but, with treatment, the HIV infection may be slowed and the onset of AIDS may be delayed. A person who tests positive can still get married or enter into a civil union, but must take care to prevent infecting his or her partner. The decision to go ahead with marriage or civil union is for you and your partner to make, as well as the very important decision to consult health care professionals, clergy, counselors and others.

### **HOW CAN I AVOID GETTING HIV?**

The best way to prevent HIV is to maintain a mutually faithful sexual relationship with an uninfected partner and to not share needles to inject drugs. The proper use of condoms — ones made of latex, not lambskin — though not completely safe, can greatly reduce the risk of acquiring or spreading HIV through sex.

## **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES**

In addition to getting the facts about HIV and AIDS, people getting married or entering into a civil union should know about other sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs. Upwards of 19 million cases of STDs are diagnosed every year in the United States. Persons of any race, religion or social, marital or economic status can get an STD.

There are many STDs. Some of the most common are syphilis, gonorrhea (“clap”), hepatitis B, chlamydia, herpes and genital warts.

### **HOW ARE STDs SPREAD?**

All STDs can be passed through sexual intercourse and some can be transmitted through other forms of close body contact. Some STDs also can be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby. A person can have an STD without any signs or symptoms. Even if symptoms go away, the infection remains and can be passed on until it’s treated. Symptoms of these diseases include sores or blisters in the genitals, mouth or anus areas; rashes; or discharges from the genitals or anus. If you have direct contact with these infectious areas, such as through sexual intercourse, you can become infected.

## **HOW CAN I REDUCE THE RISK OF GETTING AN STD?**

The risk of STD infection increases dramatically with the number of sex partners. Having sexual contact with only one person, who also is sexually faithful, greatly reduces the chances of becoming infected. Avoid having sex if you see sores, rashes or discharges from the genitals. Ask your partner about them. Using a condom — one made of latex, not lambskin — is one of the best preventive measures against STDs.

### **HOW ARE STDs TREATED?**

Some STDs, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis, can be cured with medicine and proper medical care. Others, such as hepatitis, herpes and genital warts, are difficult to cure. STDs don’t just go away and they can damage your body.

### **WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I MIGHT HAVE AN STD?**

If you suspect you may have an STD, immediately consult your doctor or local health department or call the Illinois Department of Public Health’s toll-free HIV/AIDS & STD hotline at 1-800-243-2437 or TTY (for hearing impaired use only) 1-800-782-0423. Your call will be kept confidential.

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