



Basics about HIV/AIDS diagnosis and progression

What is HIV and what is AIDS? How do they affect the human body? These are questions we're going to address, so you can have a better understanding of HIV and AIDS. Unfortunately, there is still no cure.

It starts with HIV

The only way to tell if you have HIV is through a blood test, often called an HIV antibody test. The test looks for antibodies that your body will produce if you've been infected with HIV. If the HIV antibodies are present, the test will come back positive, hence the term HIV-positive.

HIV, or the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that attacks your immune system. Your immune system produces CD4 cells that protect you against infections and viruses. As opposed to attacking a certain part of your body, HIV invades your CD4 cells, and in so doing, it replicates, producing more HIV and destroying the healthy CD4 cells.

HIV isn't what makes you physically sick. HIV breaks down your body's defence system leaving you vulnerable to other diseases. At first, you might experience minor health problems such as skin irritations or fungal infections. As your CD4 count declines, you may experience other symptoms, and more serious illnesses.

Your doctor can monitor your progress through blood tests that show your CD4 count and your viral load. A high CD4 count and low viral load can mean you may continue living in good health, without starting antiretroviral medications.

Once your CD4 count drops below 200 (the normal count is 600-1200), you're at greater risk of becoming ill. Treatments are available which may prevent illnesses and can prolong life.

From HIV to AIDS

When your CD4 count is below 200, you are at risk of developing AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. There is a list of serious illnesses that are considered to be AIDS-defining conditions. Once you've been diagnosed with one or more of these illnesses, you are said to have AIDS.

People with AIDS generally live with fluctuating health, periods of relative good health between illnesses. There are medications available that help prevent and treat some AIDS-defining conditions. Some people continue living for years after being diagnosed with AIDS.

There are several lifestyle choices people with HIV/AIDS can make that can improve their overall health:

- Find a good doctor, preferably an HIV specialist
- Eat well and take vitamin supplements
- Get plenty of rest
- Reduce stress
- Get tested for other medical conditions and STIs

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PEOPLE WITH AIDS
foundation



Living with HIV/AIDS

There are many stigmas and misconceptions associated with HIV and AIDS, which make life even more difficult for people living with the disease. And even aside from health issues, it can affect relationships, finances and job status. This is why people living with HIV/AIDS need the support and resources offered by organizations like the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation.

For more information on HIV and AIDS please contact us.

Phone: 416.506.1400

Website: www.pwatoronto.org

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