Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

How to Protect Yourself from HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a collection of symptoms and infections resulting from damage to the immune system caused by the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The late stage of this infection leaves individuals prone to opportunistic infections and tumors.

Although treatments for HIV/AIDS exist that slow the virus' progression, there is no known cure to date.

How is HIV/AIDS Spread?

HIV/AIDS is transmitted through direct contact of a mucous membrane or the bloodstream with a bodily fluid containing HIV/AIDS, such as blood, semen, vaginal fluid, preseminal fluid or breast milk. This transmission can come in the form of sex, blood transfusion, contaminated needles, exchange between mother and infant during pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding or other exposure to one of the above bodily fluids.

Many people still think only gay men need to worry about HIV/AIDS. However, the most common way HIV/AIDS is spread is through heterosexual sex. HIV/AIDS is the number one killer of men between the ages of 25 and 44, and women between the ages of 15 and 29, in the United States.

As of January 2006, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO) estimate that HIV/AIDS has killed more than 25 million people since it was first recognized on December 1, 1981, making it one of the most destructive pandemics in recorded history.

However, physiological differences between females and males place women at greater risk of infection. Delicate tissues in the female reproductive tract and concentrations of the virus in semen make it easier for infected males to transmit the disease to their female sexual partners than vice versa.

Contrary to popular belief, it’s important to note that HIV/AIDS is not spread:

- Through casual everyday contact between people.
- By coughing, sneezing, or by touching or hugging someone who has the virus.
- Through the air; in water or food; or by sharing cups, bowls, cutlery, clothing or toilet seats.
- By biting insects, such as mosquitoes, because the quantity of blood on their mouthparts is too minute.

How to Protect Yourself from HIV/AIDS

The following suggestions can help you reduce your exposure to HIV/AIDS and prevent acquiring the infection.

- Be faithful to a partner who is not HIV/AIDS infected and is faithful to you.
- Use a new condom correctly every time you have sex, even oral sex.
- Do not share injection needles, syringes or other injection equipment. Clean the needle and syringe with bleach if new ones cannot be obtained. Make sure sterilized tools are always used for tattooing or piercings.
- Do not inject illegal drugs.

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- Avoid unsafe blood contact.
- Do not have multiple sex partners.
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes.

Testing for HIV/AIDS

If you think you may have been infected by HIV/AIDS, it’s imperative that you be tested immediately. The testing should be completely confidential, and you should receive counselling to help you cope with the situation and make plans for your treatment.

Advantages of testing include:

- You can get help before you begin to feel ill.
- You can make sure you don't pass the disease to any other persons.
- You are better able to maintain a healthy immune system by eating well and avoiding smoking, alcohol and drugs.
- You can make informed decisions about sexual relations.

If you require additional information to help you understand—and protect yourself from—HIV/AIDS, consider discussing the issue with your doctor. With the infection becoming more widespread, HIV/AIDS therapists and counselors are also becoming increasingly available to answer your questions on the subject. Ask your doctor or your local health department for details.