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Department of Health and Social Services
Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux

Fact Sheet #1: HTLV-1 Virus

What is HTLV-1?

The Human T-cell Lymphotropic Virus, Type 1 (HTLV-1) infects the blood. It can cause cancer of the blood and diseases of the nervous system.

Is this a new virus?

No. It's been found in Japan, the Caribbean, in Africa and in South and North America. This virus was first described in 1978.

How can I tell if I have HTLV-1?

You need to have a blood test. Most people who have this virus will never get sick from it. Only four per cent of those who are infected will ever get sick. If people do get sick from the virus the symptoms may involve a loss of strength in the lower limbs, loss of bladder control, or cancer of the blood.

Should I get tested for HTLV-1?

Only those people who have had blood to blood contact or sexual intercourse with someone infected with HTLV-1 should ask to be tested.

How is the HTLV-1 virus spread?

HTLV-1 is spread from a person who has the virus to another by:

- *Sexual contact.* The virus can be transmitted through unprotected sex (sex without condoms)
- *Mother to infant:* Women who are infected with HTLV-1 may pass on the virus to their babies at birth or through breastfeeding
- *Sharing needles* and syringes or "rigs"

How can I protect myself against infection from HTLV-1?

The same precautions that everyone should take to protect against sexually transmitted infections apply to HTLV-1:

- Always use a condom every time you have sex. You should only use latex condoms because they work best at blocking the transfer of sexually transmitted infections. Condoms are available free of charge in all the health centers.
- Don't share needles; if people share needles during tattooing or when using drugs, they can pass on the virus to each other.

HTLV-1 is *not* spread by ordinary, everyday household contacts such as kissing, using the toilet, or preparing food. In order for the virus to spread, there has to be blood-to-blood contact or unprotected sexual intercourse.

How can I protect my baby against infection from HTLV 1?

If you know you are free of the HTLV-1 virus then you don't have to worry about transmitting the virus through breastfeeding. If you know you are positive for HTLV-1, you should discuss breastfeeding with your physician before your baby is born.

Is there a cure for HTLV-1 if I am infected?

At this time there is no known treatment for those who are infected. Scientists do not yet know of a way to get rid of the virus. But even if you are infected, you only have a small chance of developing symptoms.

Can I be infected with HTLV-1 from a blood transfusion?

It is extremely unlikely. Canadian Blood Services (previously the Red Cross) has been screening all blood donations for HTLV-1 since April 1990. Your risk is one in three million if you need a blood transfusion.

Prepared by:
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