

A I D S

A FAMILY TALKS ABOUT AIDS

Q *uestions
Children
Might
Ask*

TALKING ABOUT HIV/AIDS ISN'T EASY

Many of us have never talked about sexuality/AIDS with our children; it may not be easy, but it's never too late to start. Even if HIV/AIDS is hard to talk about, our children need to know the facts. This is how we help them make decisions based on facts, not fear.

By talking to our children about issues such as HIV/AIDS, we show that we care about them. We let them know we are interested in their future well-being.

The following questions are some of the kinds of things children ask about HIV. What they ask and how much of an answer they want from us will depend partly on their ages. Our answer may also depend on why they are asking. Try to find out what is behind a question before answering it, e.g., by asking "What have you heard?" or "Can you tell me more about your question?"

Remember that our children may also find it hard to ask us about sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Children will be able to sense our discomfort even if we don't mention it. If we are not comfortable with the topic, we need to say so; it will help set everyone at ease.

This pamphlet and a second pamphlet in this series, *Information for Parents*, give factual information to help parents answer their children's questions about sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Parents may find the information most suited for 9 to 13 year olds. You may wish to modify your answers for younger children and are encouraged to address the issues according to your own values.

QUESTIONS FOR HIV INFECTION

What is HIV infection/AIDS?

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a serious disease. It is caused by a kind of germ called a virus. The virus that causes AIDS is called Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV.



Is HIV easy to catch?

No. HIV is not easy to catch. You can't catch it as you do a cold or the flu.

How do you know if someone has HIV?

You don't, usually. Once someone is infected with HIV, it can take many years before they become sick with AIDS. People who have the virus and have not yet become sick with AIDS feel okay, and don't usually look sick at all.

How do people get HIV?

The virus can only infect people if it gets into their body through certain body fluids from another person who has the virus.

Which body fluids?

Body fluids which spread HIV are:

- Blood
- Semen (the whitish liquid that comes from a man's penis and carries sperm)
- Vaginal secretions (the moisture in a woman's vagina).

How do these fluids get into another person?

These fluids, which can contain HIV, get into the body when a person:

- Has sex (sexual intercourse) with someone who is infected with HIV; or
- Uses needles or injection equipment that have been used by a person infected with HIV. People who inject or "shoot" drugs into their bodies with injection equipment that other people have used are at risk.



Are there other ways of getting HIV?

Yes, but they are much less common. A mother who has HIV can give the virus to her baby before it is born, or by breastfeeding.

In the past, some people got HIV when they had blood transfusions or injections of blood products. At that time there was no test available to see if the blood contained HIV. Blood is now tested, so this is no longer a problem in Canada.

What about when we get injections?

In Canada, you do not have to worry about getting HIV from an injection at the clinic, from a doctor or in a hospital. New needles and syringes are used for every injection.

How do people find out if they are infected?

People can have a free blood test for HIV by their doctor or at a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) clinic. The test shows whether or not a person has HIV antibodies, which the body makes after the person becomes infected.

Can you get HIV from people before they get sick?

Yes. Someone infected with HIV, even if they don't appear sick, can pass HIV on to others through sexual intercourse or sharing needles or injection equipment.

Is there a vaccine against the virus?

No. Scientists are working hard to find a vaccine against the virus. However, the scientists say it will be at least several years before a vaccine can be developed. The best thing people can do now is to stop the virus from spreading by making sure they don't get it in the ways we talked about.

QUESTIONS ABOUT AIDS

How do people get AIDS?

People get AIDS because HIV has, after many years, damaged their body's defences (called the immune system). Once these defences have been destroyed, other germs which enter the body can make them very sick. When this happens, we say that they have AIDS.

Do people look sick when they have AIDS?

Yes, eventually. When people have actually become ill from the effects of the virus they look very sick. However, for adults that usually takes at least 5-10 years after they get the virus. For children it may take less than a year.

Is there a cure for AIDS?

Not yet. Doctors and scientists are making progress and better treatments are available for people who already have AIDS.

Does everyone with AIDS die?

So far, yes. With treatment people with AIDS are able to stay healthy much longer.

Is it true that only gay men get AIDS?

No. Anyone can get HIV. The virus is passed from one person to another by certain kinds of behaviour.

CHILDREN'S SPECIAL CONCERNS

Is it safe to play with someone who has HIV?

Yes. It's perfectly all right. You can and should talk to anyone you know who has HIV/AIDS. You can eat together. You can watch TV together. You can shake or hold hands, hug or put your arms around each other. Treat a friend with HIV/AIDS as you would any other friend and you won't catch HIV.

Can my pet get HIV?

No. Only human beings get HIV. Dogs and cats don't get HIV.

Can you get HIV from kissing?

No. You can't get HIV from a kiss.

How can I be sure I won't get HIV?

If you don't have sexual intercourse or share needles or injection equipment, you don't need to worry about getting HIV. When you are ready to have sex, you must learn ways to protect yourself from HIV infection. Make sure equipment used for tattooing or body piercing is sterile.





SEXUALITY QUESTIONS

What is sexuality?

All people have sexual feelings, including children. The feelings are natural. There are many ways to show these feelings. When grown-ups become close with one another, they may show their sexual feelings by hugging, kissing, petting or by having sexual intercourse.

What is sex?

Many people use the word "sex" to mean sexual intercourse.





What is sexual intercourse?

Sexual intercourse is something two adults do together to physically express their closeness. It usually involves placing the penis in the vagina or anus.

When do people have sexual intercourse?

Adults have intercourse when they are very sure that they want to be close to another person, mentally and physically. A person needs to be mature in both their body and emotions to be able to handle the responsibilities that come with sexual intercourse.

My parents have sex. Will they get AIDS?

No, if neither of your parents has HIV, they are safe from AIDS. They will be safe as long as they do not have sex or share injection equipment with anyone else who might have HIV.

What is "safer sex"?

"Safer sex" means being intimate sexually, without risking getting your partner's semen or vaginal fluids into your body. It can mean not having sexual intercourse but still showing your partner in other ways that you care for them.



"Safer sex" can also mean that there is protection used; for example, using a condom while having sexual intercourse. This helps to prevent one partner from spreading HIV or other diseases that are passed through sex to the other partner.

What is a condom?

A condom is a thin piece of rubber that fits over a man's penis like a glove. When the man has sex with someone, the condom keeps his semen from getting into his partner's body and protects the man from his partner's fluids. Condoms are now available for women.

What does being heterosexual mean?

A heterosexual person, sometimes called straight, has a close emotional and sexual



relationship with a person of the opposite sex; that is, a man and a woman together.

What does being homosexual mean?

A homosexual person, sometimes called gay or lesbian, has a close emotional and sexual (intimate) relationship with a person of the same sex. The term lesbian refers to a woman who is intimate with another woman and gay refers to a man who is intimate with another man. The term bisexual refers to a person who is intimate with both men and women.

EXPLICIT QUESTIONS

Children may ask us questions that we may find alarming. It is important to remember that children are naturally curious. They hear words or expressions and want answers. They usually need a simple, direct response.

**Does AIDS Hurt?* offers further examples of questions such as "What is oral sex and anal sex?" Remember to review all resources yourself to make sure the approach adheres to your philosophy and your family's values.

FURTHER INFORMATION/RESOURCES

For additional copies of this series please fax, Alberta Health & Wellness at (780) 427-3023. For information on HIV infection/AIDS, contact:

- AIDS/Sexually Transmitted Disease Information Line (1-800-772-2437)
- Regional Health Authorities
- Community HIV Organizations
- Your doctor

**Does AIDS Hurt? Educating Young Children About AIDS.* M. Quakenbush and S. Villarreal. 1988. Alberta Edition, 1990. Available: most elementary schools, health units, public libraries, bookstores.