



AMERICAN COLLEGE OF  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNECOLOGISTS

## HIV Infection and Women

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Many people think AIDS is a disease that affects only homosexual men and intravenous (IV) drug users. This is not true. The rate of HIV infection is rising most rapidly among heterosexual women. HIV infection is the third leading cause of death among women 25 to 44 years old.

### HIV and AIDS

#### ***How Infection Occurs***

The virus enters the bloodstream by way of body fluids — in most cases, blood or semen.

***How Infection Is Spread*** HIV infection is spread through contact with the body fluids of an infected person.

HIV cannot be spread by casual contact with people and objects.

#### ***Effects of HIV***

A person who has been infected with HIV does not get sick with AIDS right away.

The infection is called AIDS when a person has certain conditions or symptoms that result from a weakened immune system.

Over time, HIV infection results in severe illness. The body is left open to harmful infections and certain types of cancer.

It may be months or years before HIV becomes AIDS.

### HIV Transmission in Women

Most women get the HIV virus by using IV drugs or having sex with men who use such drugs.

#### **Testing for HIV**

A simple blood test can tell you whether you have been infected with HIV. It looks for HIV antibodies in the blood.

#### ***Who Should Be Tested***

Women who are of childbearing age should think about being tested for HIV.

#### ***What the Results Mean***

A positive test means that you are infected with HIV and can pass the virus on to others.

A negative test means that HIV antibodies were not found in your blood.

### Protecting Yourself and Others

#### ***Use a Condom***

Condoms don't offer complete protection against HIV infection.

#### ***Practice Safer Sex***

The safest practice of all is to not have sex. However, "safer" sex means sexual practices that reduce the risk of HIV transmission.

- Know your partner
- Limit sexual partners
- Avoid risky sex practices

### ***Don't Use Drugs***

Injecting ("shooting") drugs greatly increases your chances of HIV infection.

### **Concerns for HIV-Positive Women**

Women who are HIV positive have special health concerns. These include birth control, certain conditions, and pregnancy and childbirth.

#### ***Birth Control***

An HIV-infected woman can avoid pregnancy by using effective birth control.

#### ***Certain Conditions***

A woman infected with HIV is more likely to get yeast infections and pelvic inflammatory disease — an inflammation of the reproductive organs.

If you are infected with HIV, you will need to be tested for other STDs.

#### ***Pregnancy and Childbirth***

If you are pregnant and infected with HIV, it can harm your baby. Treatment with medication can lower this risk.

#### **Finally...**

HIV infection is not a disease that only "other people" get. You can become infected if you are exposed to the virus. Every woman must know how to protect herself, her partner and her children.

*This excerpt from ACOG's Patient Education Pamphlet is provided for your information. It is not medical advice and should not be relied upon as a substitute for visiting your doctor. If you need medical care, have any questions, or wish to receive the full text of this Patient Education Pamphlet, please contact your obstetrician-gynecologist.*

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