



CHILD AIDS PREVENTION

Fact Sheet

What is HIV?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a very small germ, called a virus. HIV attacks the body's immune system, which is the part of the body that fights off germs that cause infection. Over time, HIV slowly kills the cells of the immune system making it so weak that the body can no longer defend itself.

What is AIDS?

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) develops when someone infected with HIV develops severe infections that would not ordinarily cause disease in persons with healthy immune systems. Usually a person who has AIDS will have infections that last a long time. There is no cure for AIDS. The disease will progress over time, and the body will become too weak to survive. With the newer more active treatments (antiretroviral drugs or ARVs) the growth of the virus is slowed and HIV-infected individuals may live healthier, longer lives for several decades.

How is HIV infection diagnosed?

HIV is diagnosed by means of a simple blood test. Depending on the location, either a special antibody test or a rapid HIV test is performed. The rapid HIV test can be performed on a blood drop from a finger stick, saliva or a urine sample.

How is HIV/AIDS spread?

HIV lives in the body fluids of infected people. Body fluids include blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk. HIV spreads when body fluid of an infected person enters the body of another person. This means HIV can be spread by:

- Having unsafe sex with someone who is infected with the virus
- Using unclean needles, syringes or any tool that pierces or cuts the skin
- Receiving a blood transfusion with infected blood
- Getting infected blood into cuts or open wounds
- Passing from an HIV-infected mother to her baby during birth or by breastfeeding

How is HIV passed from mother to child?

- Infants have the greatest chance of becoming infected with HIV during labor and delivery. At that time, the infant is exposed to the mother's blood and vaginal secretions.
- HIV may also be transmitted to infants from breast milk.
- Not all infants born to HIV-infected mothers will become infected with the HIV.

How much HIV transmission to infants can be prevented?

A single dose of a drug, such as nevirapine, can reduce HIV transmission to infants by as much as 50%. If more expensive combination antiretroviral drugs can be administered to the mother throughout her pregnancy, HIV infections of their babies can be reduced by 98%.

What is nevirapine?

Nevirapine is a highly effective antiretroviral drug, which is administered in pill form to an HIV-infected pregnant woman and in liquid form to her infant child. This drug alone, which costs only \$1 for the mother and baby, can reduce infections in the infant by 50%.

If breastfeeding is known to transmit HIV infection, isn't the protection of nevirapine lost with continued breastfeeding?

HIV transmission through breastfeeding most likely occurs during the first few months of life. Long-term follow-up of breastfeeding infants showed that the 50% reduction in HIV transmission is maintained even with continued breastfeeding for as long as one year. Nevertheless, mothers are encouraged to wean their infants at 5 to 6 months.

How much would it cost to treat all of the HIV-infected pregnant women in the world with nevirapine for one year?

There are approximately 2 million HIV-infected pregnant women worldwide who give birth yearly to 700,000 HIV-infected infants. The cost of nevirapine for these 2 million women and their infants is less than \$2 million per year. However, many countries lack an adequate healthcare infrastructure required for counseling and HIV rapid testing. Nevertheless, getting nevirapine to HIV-infected pregnant women is absolutely necessary if infant lives are to be saved.

How many lives could be saved each year if nevirapine were available to treat all HIV-infected pregnant women and their infants?

Nevirapine could prevent 50% of HIV infections in 700,000 infants each year. Thus 350,000 lives could be saved each year and over 3.5 million lives in a decade. If combination drugs were administered, over 6 million lives could be saved.