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HIV/AIDS Information

Human Immunodeficiency Virus is a virus that attacks and breaks down the immune system (the body's defense force that fights off infection and disease). When the immune system is weak, we lose protection against illness, and are vulnerable to many serious infections and cancers. **AIDS (Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome)** is the condition that people develop after getting one or more serious infections connected with HIV, or when blood tests show the immune system has been badly damaged by the virus. HIV can take many years to break down the immune system and cause AIDS. Most people have few, if any, symptoms for several years after becoming infected. But once HIV gets into the body it can "hide" for months or years, and during this time can do serious damage to the immune system. People who appear perfectly healthy may have the virus, without knowing it, and pass it onto others. It is not known for certain how long it takes a person with HIV to become sick and develop AIDS.

How HIV is Transmitted:

HIV is spread when body fluids of an infected person pass into another person's body. The three most common ways are:

- **Unprotected Sex:** Vaginal, oral, or anal sex without a condom or dental dam. The virus can be in semen, vaginal fluid, and blood.
- **Sharing I.V. Drug "Works":** Needles, syringes, or eyedroppers. The virus can be passed by blood left in the "works".
- **From an infected woman to her child before or during birth, or while breastfeeding.**

Note: A small number of people have gotten the virus from blood transfusions. When someone donates blood now, it is always tested; the current blood supply is safer than ever. You cannot get HIV/AIDS from *giving* blood.

HIV/AIDS is **NOT** spread by casual contact with people or objects, such as: hugging, coughs, swimming pools, toilet seats, insect or animal bites, or touching.

How the HIV Test Works:

When HIV enters the blood, the body reacts by making cells called antibodies. An HIV test looks for these antibodies. It usually takes the body several weeks to six months to show up on a test. During this time the HIV test cannot test for infection. If you are being tested, it is important to discuss your window period with your doctor, nurse practitioner, or HIV counselor, to determine whether you are taking the test at an appropriate time.

To Protect Yourself:

Don't:

- Have sex without using protection.
- Share I.V. drug works. Most HIV-positive woman became infected by shooting drugs. I.V. drug use had never been so dangerous! Get help if you think you have an addiction.

Do:

- Use latex or vinyl condom for each sex act, so that body fluids (especially semen) are not passed between you and your partner. Female condoms, provided they stay in place and don't break, are also effective at preventing some STD's. Condoms are also recommended for oral sex performed on a man, and dental dams are recommended for oral sex performed on a woman. Natural or Lambskin condoms do not reliably protect against HIV.
- Use Nonoxynol-9 spermicides, found in drugstores in foam or jelly form. Use with a condom for extra protection, especially if the condom breaks. Some research proves that these can help kill the HIV virus, though it is still important to use a condom as well. Some women are allergic to Nonoxynol-9, so try it first on a small patch of skin. If you experience irritation, try another brand.
- Use only water-based lubricants with condoms, such as K-Y Kelly or Astroglide. Do not use Vaseline, baby oil, Crisco, hand lotions, or any other products containing oil or petroleum. These can make condoms break.

Remember:

- **Alcohol and Drugs can inhibit your judgment-** Know your limits.
- Taking an HIV test may be scary, but it is one of the best ways to prevent the development of HIV into full blown AIDS. Finding out that you have HIV can be an important step in taking care of your health and planning for the future. Learning that you are HIV negative, too, can help you figure out how to stay that way.
- Discussing sex and insisting on safer sex precautions with a partner can be difficult and awkward, but can also be a rewarding and shared experience.
- **If you are pregnant, and plan to carry to term, HIV testing is highly recommended.** HIV can be passed from mother to child before or at birth, or through breastfeeding. However, with proper medical care, a woman can now greatly reduce the risk of giving HIV to her infant. The chance of a woman transmitting HIV to her child during pregnancy is 25% to less than 8% depending on the infected mother's immune system, and what steps she takes to reduce risk to her newborn.