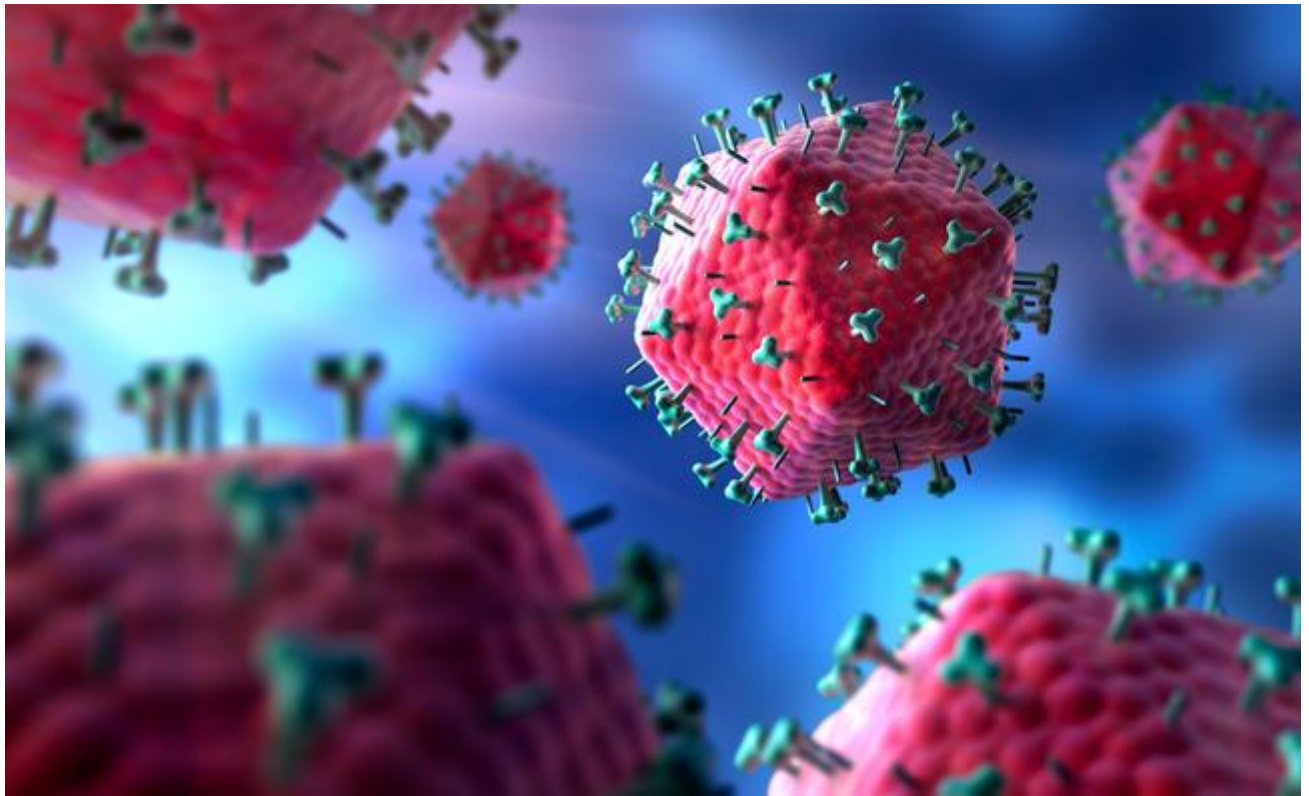


What you really need to know about AIDS

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We can't afford to ignore HIV/AIDS, a disease that has infected more than 35 million people worldwide!



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When you consider that more than 35 million people worldwide are living with HIV/AIDS, an estimated 2.3 million people were infected in 2012 and in the same year, 1.6 million people died from AIDS worldwide, the importance of creating awareness about HIV/AIDS cannot be overemphasised!

“An estimated 6.4 million South Africans are living with HIV/AIDS, according to the 2012 household survey findings of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC),” says Allison Vienings, Executive Director of the Self-Medication Manufacturers Association of South Africa (SMASA). “A shocking 70% of people living with HIV are from Sub-Saharan Africa,” she states.

In light of World AIDS Day, on 1 December, make sure you know everything you need to know about HIV/AIDS...

What is HIV/AIDS?

Human Immunodeficiency (HIV) is the virus that leads to AIDS. The virus weakens the immune system by destroying the important cells that fight disease and infections.

HIV is similar to other viruses, with the exception that your immune system cannot fight HIV. The virus systematically destroys cells in your body, making it unable to fight infections and disease. This phase of the infection can lead to AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency), the final stage of the HIV infection.

How can HIV be transmitted?

The HIV virus can be transmitted in the following ways...

- Having unprotected sex, either vaginal, anal or orally, with an infected person
- Blood transfusions or contaminated blood
- Sharing contaminated needles, syringes or other sharp instruments
- From mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding
- Ways to prevent transmission
- Practise safe sex using condoms
- Get regularly tested for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV
- Always ensure needles and syringes are new and disposable when you have to be injected
- Ensure that any blood that you may need is tested for HIV

Busting HIV/AIDS myths

- You can NOT get HIV by hugging, touching or sharing eating utensils with someone who is HIV positive
- HIV is NOT limited to a specific race, gender or sexual orientation
- The virus can NOT be cured by having sex with a virgin
- You can NOT get HIV from mosquitoes
- The use of traditional medicines can NOT cure HIV

Signs and symptoms

The signs and symptoms of HIV and AIDS vary depending on the phase of infection.

Some people develop HIV symptoms shortly after being infected. The first HIV symptoms may include swollen glands in the throat, armpit or groin, slight fever, headaches, fatigue, and muscle aches. These symptoms may last for a few weeks.

There are usually no HIV symptoms for many years, making it difficult to determine whether you may be infected.

AIDS symptoms appear in the most advanced stage of HIV and may include:

- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Loss of vision
- Weight loss
- Severe and persistent diarrhoea
- Nausea, stomach cramps and vomiting

Treatment

Today, there are 31 antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) approved by the US Food and Drug Administration to treat HIV infection.

“These treatments do not cure people of HIV or AIDS. They suppress the virus even at undetectable levels, but do not completely eliminate the virus from your body,” explains Vienings. “However, suppressing the amount of virus in the body does not mean that the virus cannot be transmitted. A person infected should continuously take antiretroviral drugs in order to maintain their health,” she adds.

Self-care, nutrition and a healthy lifestyle for those living with HIV and AIDS are essential and proactive steps in taking care of your own health.

Eating healthy food, getting immunizations and ensuring you are careful around pets that may carry infection-causing parasites are some of the ways of implementing self-care as an aid to medical treatment. Medical treatment for HIV/AIDS should however always be the first and basic step to managing the disease.

People who are HIV positive and who struggle with malnutrition and vitamin deficiency can significantly speed up the progression of the disease. Nutritional supplements can be used to counter this, whether malnutrition is the result of poor nutrition or HIV

If you think you may have any or all of the symptoms associated with HIV/AIDS, visit your local health care professional or doctor immediately.