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FROM AMERICAN RED CROSS PAMPHLET - HIV & AIDS: GET THE FACTS

HIV & AIDS

AIDS is one of the leading causes of death for Americans between the ages of 25 and 44, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Many of the people who are infected with HIV today did not believe they were at risk.

HIV is serious. HIV is deadly. HIV will be with us for a long time. You don't have to get HIV if you follow some simple rules of prevention. The following information about HIV infection and AIDS will help you and those you love learn to protect yourselves.

FACT: AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV.

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is the virus that causes AIDS – acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. HIV is spread from one person to another through sex and blood-to-blood contact. When someone becomes infected with HIV, the virus attacks that person's immune system (the system that defends the body from illness). A person develops AIDS when his or her immune system becomes so damaged that it can no longer fight off diseases and infections. These diseases and infections can be fatal. Most people get infected with HIV by having unprotected sex or sharing needles with someone who already has the virus. HIV does not discriminate. Anyone can get HIV.

FACT: People infected with HIV may look and feel healthy for a long time.

It may take up to 10 years for people who are infected with HIV to develop AIDS. They may look and feel healthy for years after becoming infected. They may not know they are infected. Even if they don't look or feel sick, they can infect others.

FACT: When signs of illness do appear, they vary from person to person.

Some people get fevers or diarrhea. Most people get swollen glands that won't clear up. Many lose weight for no apparent reason. This is because the virus harms the body's defenses (immune system). When people develop AIDS, they may have illnesses that healthy people would usually resist. Only a blood test can tell if someone is infected with HIV. Only a doctor can diagnose AIDS.

FACT: You cannot "catch" HIV like you do a cold or flu.

Unlike many other viruses, HIV is not spread through the air or water. HIV is not spread through everyday casual contact.

You cannot get HIV from – handshakes, hugs, coughs or sneezes, sweat or tears, mosquitoes or other insects, pets, eating food prepared by someone else, being around an infected person. **Or from using** – swimming pools, toilet seats, phones or computers, straws, spoons, or cups, drinking fountains.

FACT: Most people with HIV or AIDS got the virus by having sex or sharing needles with someone who was already infected – even once may put you at risk.

These are the most common ways in which HIV is spread: Having vaginal, anal, or oral sex without a latex condom, with someone who has HIV. Sharing needles or syringes with someone who is infected with HIV. From an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or, rarely, through breast feeding.

FACT: You can protect yourself from the virus.

The best ways to prevent HIV infection are: Do not have sex. You can get infected from even one sexual experience. Avoid contact with another person's blood, semen, or vaginal fluid. Do not shoot drugs. Never share any kind of needle or syringe. Any object that breaks the skin should not be shared. Do not use drugs or alcohol. They can keep you from thinking clearly and cause you to make unwise decisions.

If you are sexually active – have sex only with a partner who is not infected, who has sex only with you, and who does not shoot drugs or share needles and syringes. Keep in mind that it is difficult to know these things about another person. **Always use a latex condom** for any kind of sex because it's possible you won't know if your partner is infected. **Make smart decisions.** Whether you have sex and whether you use condoms are decisions you can make over and over. You can choose not to have sex, even if you have had sex in the past. You can choose to use condoms even if you have not used condoms in the past. Use what you have learned to make decisions about sex that are good for you and for your partner. Get the **latest information** from the CDC.

FACT: Latex condoms (rubbers) can help prevent HIV infection.

Latex condoms can help lower your risk of HIV infection during sex, as well as your risk of contracting other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Latex condoms act as an effective barrier to diseases. But condoms are not foolproof. They don't completely eliminate the risk of becoming infected because they can break, tear, or slip off. They must be put on before genital contact. And they must be used the right way – from start to finish – every time for vaginal, anal, and oral sex. **Find out how.**

Birth control pills and diaphragms will not protect you or your partner from HIV or other STDs.

FACT: It is impossible for a donor to get HIV from giving blood or plasma.

In the United States, every piece of equipment (needles, tubing, containers) used to draw blood is sterile and brand new. It is used only once, and then destroyed. You cannot get HIV from giving blood.

FACT: The chances of getting HIV from a blood transfusion in the United States are now extremely low.

Early in the AIDS epidemic, some people became infected with HIV through infected blood in the nations' blood supply. Since then, the risk of getting an HIV-contaminated transfusion has dropped dramatically and is now estimated to be two in one million units of blood. The Red Cross and other blood banks use a combination of ways to protect the blood supply, including –

Screening of donors. Since 1983, those who want to give blood are not allowed to give blood if they indicate they are at risk of being infected with HIV.

Testing donated blood and plasma for signs of HIV since 1985, when tests became available. If a test shows the presence of HIV, that blood is destroyed. Over time, testing methods have greatly improved. However, testing cannot completely eliminate the risk of infected blood. If someone donates blood or plasma soon after becoming infected, current tests may not always be able to detect the presence of the virus.

FACT: There are blood tests for HIV.

If you think you may be infected with HIV, you may want to consider taking an antibody blood test and getting counseling both before and after being tested. These blood tests look for the presence of HIV antibodies in the blood as signs of the virus. The body almost always develops antibodies to fight off viruses that enter the blood stream.

The “window period” affects test results..... Current blood tests are over 99 percent accurate. However, there is usually a window period from a few weeks to a few months after a person becomes infected for enough antibodies to develop to be detected in a blood test. For this reason, if someone was infected recently, the test may not yet show that the person is infected. Contact your local public health department, AIDS service organization, Red Cross chapter, or doctor's office for more information about testing and HIV counseling.

FACT: So far, there is no vaccine for HIV or a cure for AIDS.

Some medicines that are now available help to treat the symptoms of AIDS patients and allow them to live more comfortably. None of these medicines can keep a person from becoming infected with HIV. None of the treatments can cure AIDS. But people can prevent HIV infection by learning the facts and acting on them. Find out more about **HIV/AIDS treatment.**

FACT: You can help fight the battle against HIV and AIDS by being a volunteer.

Volunteers are always needed. They can answer AIDS hotlines and help teach others about HIV and AIDS. They can help people living with AIDS by shopping for them or bringing meals to their homes. They can help raise funds to fight this epidemic. Call **your local Red Cross chapter** or AIDS service organization to learn how you can help.

To learn more facts about HIV and AIDS, order the American Red Cross **HIV/AIDS Facts Book**.

Further information about HIV/AIDS can be obtained from your Red Cross chapter, local or state health department, other community agencies, the National AIDS Network agency, or the National AIDS Hot Line. The Hot Line number is 1-800-342-AIDS.