

KOLIME\* HEALTH SERIES

03

# HIV 10 in Questions

\*Koli: Means sexual intercourse in LGBTI+ jargon in Turkey.



# **HIV**

# **10**

**in**

# **Questions**

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## Are HIV and AIDS the same?

No, they are not. HIV is a virus, while AIDS is a syndrome. HIV is the acronym for “Human Immunodeficiency Virus”, and AIDS is the acronym for “Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome”.

HIV infection is a treatable health issue. AIDS, on the other hand, is an advanced clinical stage of HIV infection that happens if the infection is not treated for a long time, which means AIDS itself is not an illness. During the AIDS stage, the immune system crashes and the infected body becomes susceptible to cancer and opportunistic infections. If HIV is mitigated with appropriate and regular treatment, it is possible to stop the infection before it reaches the AIDS stage.



## How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is transmitted by direct contact with the body fluids of an HIV-infected person. Five body fluids carry the risk of transmission: blood, breast milk, semen, vaginal discharge, and rectal discharge. Whatever the case, it is possible to transmit the infection by sharing intravenous tools such as syringes. All sexual intercourse without condoms carries the risk to transmit the infection and while low, it is still possible to be

infected with HIV during oral sex without a dental dam. Open oral and gum wounds or oral/gum bleeding raise the infection risk. Without appropriate treatment planning, it is possible for a mother infected with HIV to transmit the infection to the baby. Blood transfusion and organ and tissue transplants may also transmit HIV, but the risk is low because blood and blood products are routinely tested against HIV before the donation.



### How isn't HIV transmitted?

HIV is not transmitted by urine, sweat or saliva. HIV is not transmitted by sharing bathtubs, toilet seats, doorknobs, towels, clothes, cups, forks, knives, etc. HIV is not transmitted by social contact and shaking hands with, kissing or hugging a person infected with HIV. HIV is not transmitted by mosquito or bug bites.



### What are the first symptoms of HIV infection?

During the first two to four weeks of infection, the person infected may seem to have the symptoms of flu. Since fatigue, high fever, runny nose, lymph node swelling, rash, lack of appetite, nausea, diarrhea and headache, sore

fever, sore muscles and sore joints are also symptoms of flu, HIV infection may not always come to mind. People with these symptoms usually feel like this is the worst flu they have ever experienced. The symptoms disappear within a few weeks. The viral load and transmission risk are the highest during this period. If treatment does not start during this early stage, what follows is eight to ten years with no symptoms. AIDS is the last stage of this timeline. In this last stage, HIV has destroyed CD4 cells and the immune system, and tuberculosis, pneumonia, fungal infections and certain types of skin cancer may occur. Extreme fatigue, dizziness, shortness of breath, candidiasis, lymph node swelling, rashes, and extreme weight loss are present.



## How do I know whether I'm infected with HIV?

The only way to know is to get tested. There are multiple methods for testing. It is possible to overlook or fail to notice the symptoms during the early stage. The infection may progress without symptoms for years. So, when in doubt, you must consult a doctor. The doctor will get your detailed medical history and carry out a physical examination, and ask for a commonly used

blood work. If the first test comes back positive, another test will be carried out to crosscheck the results to avoid a false positive. This test will be assigned a number and sent to a public health lab. If this second test also comes back positive, the number is utilized to start the treatment free of charge, in scope of general health insurance by the Ministry of Health. Usually, a person carries more than just one infection because the damage or degradation caused by an illness usually paves the way for other infections and transmission is easier. So, if you are HIV-infected, it is smart to look into other possible infections such as hepatitis B, syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia. You can get tested anonymously, in accordance with the patient privacy principle, without giving out your ID information.



## When should I get tested for HIV?

The period between HIV entering the body and the virus being detected in the blood is called “the window period”. For the test to produce accurate results, the window period needs to have ended. In the past, this took months. Today, owing to new technology, it takes only 14 days. You can get tested 14 days after a risky contact. However, the test you have to ask for in this period is not a routinely used test, so make sure to consult your doctor.



## Is it possible to protect oneself from HIV?

Yes, it is possible to protect yourself. There isn't a vaccination against HIV yet, but you can protect yourself with pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medications. For medications to use before or after unprotected contact, consult your doctor. Both methods are based on an anti-retroviral (used for ART-HIV treatment) combination drug utilization regularly, for a minimum of one month. Both are non-routine protection methods, and should only be used in emergencies.

There are other protection methods: never sharing syringes, using condoms for every sexual intercourse (use water-based lube), etc. Unprotected contact is a serious risk. Appropriate and consistent condom use provides protection against infections transmitted by body fluids such as hepatitis B, gonorrhea, chlamydia, ureaplasma, and trichomonas infections and infections that cause genital sores, ulcers and warts such as syphilis, HPV, herpes (HSV), as well as HIV. You might use a dental dam during oral sex and if you share your sex toys, you may cover them with condoms.

**Note:** There is no evidence that washing outer genitals, urinating or taking a shower right after sex provides protection. Unexpected discharge, and especially rashes or sores on the



vagina, penis or the groin might be a symptom. If you notice such symptoms, consult the closest medical center as soon as possible and if necessary, get tested.



## Can HIV be treated?

Yes. HIV is an infection that can be treated, just like other chronic diseases. Although it is not yet possible to fully recover from it, it is possible to keep the infection under control with an appropriate and consistent, life-long treatment. With consistent treatment, HIV-infected persons can live a healthy life. Anti-retroviral drugs with low side effect profile and high success rates are used for treatment. These drugs, usually taken once a day consistently and continuously for life, provide a treatment that doesn't lower the patient's quality of life. If there is an infection, your doctor will plan your treatment in line with drug interactions and response to treatment.



## What does U=U mean?

HIV treatment is life-long. The objective of the treatment is to lower the viral load and decrease its presence to a low, undetectable level by suppressing the virus. When the viral load is decreased

to an undetectable level and suppressed for six months at an undetectable level, the person no longer transmits the infection. It is scientifically proven that persons with an undetectable viral load cannot transmit the virus. This state is called “Undetectable=Untransmittable”.



## What should I do if I have relentless questions about HIV?

This booklet of Kolime Health Series is prepared to raise awareness and answer the most basic questions about HIV in part. For more detailed information, you can follow up-to-date scientific publications. If you are concerned about your health, consult your primary care physician first. Later, if need be, you can consult an infection specialist doctor (infectiologist). For an accurate diagnosis, get tested. Consult medical institutions that provide advice and anonymous testing for STDs.

This brochure is a result of the efforts of Hevi LGBTI Association's Health Commission. The content of this brochure was prepared by Dr. Yeşim Yasin, Public Health Program Associate, and Psychologist Selçuk Çelik.

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