

Fact Check: Misconceptions About HIV/AIDS

Fear fueled misconceptions and stigma at the height of the AIDS crisis. Though information surrounding HIV/AIDS is more accessible now, some people still misunderstand the conditions, their effects and how HIV is spread. This fact check will clear up misconceptions and stigma and inform on how to effectively prevent HIV and AIDS.

MISCONCEPTION: HIV/AIDS can spread through touch or bodily fluids like tears, sweat, saliva or urine.

FACT CHECK: Breathing the same air, drinking from the same water fountain or touching the same surface as someone with the virus cannot infect you. Hugging, kissing, shaking hands, sharing eating utensils or using exercise equipment at a gym with someone with HIV also does not spread it. You can get HIV through blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. Several studies have also shown mosquitos cannot spread HIV. They do not inject the blood of others into you, and the virus does not live long inside of them.

MISCONCEPTION: Only gay people can get HIV.

FACT CHECK: Gay men make up two-thirds of new HIV diagnoses in the U.S., but it isn't because of who they are. A misconception is that gay men are acting less responsibly. However, research actually shows that they use condoms more often and take other precautions to protect themselves. Since the epidemic's beginning, rates of HIV in the gay community were high. Therefore, the chances of gay men coming into contact with the virus still are high.

Additionally, because of the type of cells and fluids in various body parts, anal sex is the riskiest form of sex for spreading HIV.

Regardless, straight people still can contract HIV. About 1 in 6 men and 3 in 4 women who have HIV got it from heterosexual contact. Oral sex, though less risky than other forms of sex, also can spread HIV.

Homophobia and stigma against the gay community can prevent LGBTQ people with HIV from seeking treatment or preventative measures.

MISCONCEPTION: HIV is a death sentence.

FACT CHECK: HIV is a chronic illness that there is currently no cure for. However, medical advances have allowed people to live long lives with the virus as they manage it.

MISCONCEPTION: You can tell if someone has HIV or AIDS by looking at them.

FACT CHECK: You cannot tell if someone has HIV just by looking at them. Additionally, some people do not show symptoms of HIV for years. The only way to know for sure is to take a test.

MISCONCEPTION: People getting treatment for HIV can't spread it.

FACT CHECK: HIV treatment can make the virus less detectable in the blood, but it can still spread. Additionally, if both members of a couple have HIV, they should still practice safe sex to prevent other, more treatment-resistant strains of the virus from spreading.

MISCONCEPTION: People with HIV are dirty, reckless or deviant.

FACT CHECK: These and other moral claims about people with HIV are not only inaccurate, but also they lead to discrimination. There are precautions people should take to prevent HIV transmission, but it can happen to anyone, regardless of race, class or sexual orientation. Equating people of certain races, classes or sexual orientations with the disease is xenophobic and ill-informed. Stigma is harmful. It can lead to HIV-positive people failing to seek treatment and suffering from other health issues, such as mental illness. Regardless of someone's HIV status, they still are worthy of respect and dignity.