

HEALTH EDUCATION COUNCIL

AIDS Leaflet

2nd draft/June 1984

What is AIDS?

AIDS is a condition which prevents the body's defences from working properly. As a result, people get illnesses which the body would normally be able to fight off quite easily. Some of these illnesses can become serious or fatal.

Many AIDS patients have one or both of two rare diseases:

- * Kaposi's sarcoma - a type of cancer mainly of the skin but also affecting other organs.
- * Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia - a serious infection of the lungs.

AIDS patients may also develop other infections such as:

- * Thrush extending beyond the mouth. Thrush is a common usually mild infection but in AIDS patients it becomes widespread throughout the body with serious consequences.
- Other Infections. AIDS patients are at special risk of developing serious illness due to other usually rare infections.

Why is it called AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Acquired - means that it's caught from an infected person as opposed to inherited.

Immune Deficiency - is a condition in which the body is unable to defend itself against certain illnesses.

Syndrome - the illnesses that result.

Who gets AIDS?

By June 1984 there had been 5,500 cases of AIDS reported worldwide. The USA was the country most affected: all but 500 of the cases were reported there.

Nearly three quarters of all those AIDS patients were ^{homosexual} [gay] men. About a fifth were drug addicts, both men and women, who had shared needles.

The others include:- people from Haiti

- [black] Africans from Central Africa
- patients who had received blood transfusions from infected donors
- women who had bisexual partners or partners who were intravenous drug users.
- the newborn babies of mothers who had AIDS.
- haemophiliacs need treatment with blood products because their blood doesn't clot.

In the UK, 51 cases of AIDS had been reported by June 1984 - more than three quarters of them gay men.

What are the symptoms?

As you begin to read this list of symptoms, you might start thinking "Yes, I've got that ... and that ... and that ... Oh no, I've got it". Well, perhaps, but most probably not. Remember there can be lots of other reasons for nearly all these symptoms. For example,

swollen glands can be a sign of glandular fever; and tiredness, fever and weight loss are much more likely to be signs of worry or going without sleep, or a sign of a cold coming on.

The symptoms are:

Swollen glands, especially in the neck and armpits.

Profound fatigue, which lasts for several weeks, with no obvious cause.

Unexpected weight loss - more than 10 pounds (4.5 kg) in two months without dieting.

Fever and night sweats, lasting for several weeks.

Diarrhoea which lasts for more than a week, with no obvious cause.

Shortness of breath and a dry cough lasting longer than it would if it were just from a bad cold.

Skin disease - new painless, flat or raised, pink to purple blotches, hard in texture, getting bigger, like a bruise or a blood blister. Anywhere on the skin, including in the mouth on the eyelids, or other areas such as the rectum.

Thrush in the mouth - a thick whitish coating on the tongue or throat.

What to do if you're worried

If you are gay and have had multiple partners or feel you may have been exposed to AIDS go to a sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinic for advice. To find your nearest sexually transmitted disease clinic, look in the phone book under VD (Venereal Disease).

If you have any other reason to suspect you have been at risk of contracting AIDS you should consult your general practitioner.

If you wish you can ring Gay Switchboard 01 837 7324 for further information or write to Terrence Higgins Trust, PO Box BM/AIDS, London WC1 3XX.

Is there a test which can tell whether you have AIDS?

There's no quick and easy test which will tell you yes or no.

AIDS is diagnosed by clinical examination and repeated laboratory tests.

If you go to see a doctor, he or she will

- take details of any past illnesses
- give you a complete medical examination
- take a small sample of your blood and test it to see if there are any signs of lowered resistance. Even if there are, this doesn't mean that you've [definitely] got AIDS. There are lots of reasons for lower resistance.

If you are at all at risk, the best thing you can do is to see a doctor for regular check ups.

Is AIDS catching?

It's not yet known exactly how people acquire AIDS. However it seems that:

- * AIDS can be passed on by sexual contact (in much the same way as serum jaundice hepatitis B is passed on)
- * something in the blood of an AIDS patient may cause AIDS in another person if it enters their bloodstream. Intravenous drug users may use needles which have been in contact with someone else's blood.

There is absolutely no reason to think that AIDS can be spread through the air, or by touch, or in saliva.

How can you reduce your risk of getting AIDS?

The best advice for gay men is to keep down the number of different sexual partners you have and to be as sure as you can that your partners are restricting the number of partners that they have, too. They should also refrain from sexual practices which may damage the rectum [such as "rimming" or "fisting".] It's not yet known whether the way you have sex affects your risk of getting AIDS. Until more is known, the only completely safe type of sex for gay men with multiple partners is masturbation.

Using a condom may help to reduce your risk of getting AIDS, and in any case it can protect you against other sexually transmitted diseases.

Should I give blood?

Until the cause of AIDS is understood, donors are asked if they

might be at any risk of getting AIDS not to give blood.

[See also 'AIDS and how it concerns blood donors' a leaflet available from the National Blood Transfusion Service and STD clinics.]

What is being done?

Research is in progress in the USA and other countries and there have been major developments both in recognising the early signs of AIDS and in the treatment of the resulting illnesses.

For further information/help

Gay switchboard: 01-837 7324 can answer queries about AIDS.

Terrence Higgins Trust

Box BM/AIDS

London WC1N 3XX

is setting up a "buddy scheme" to help out with AIDS patients who are at home and need help with washing, cleaning, etc.

SCODA

(address and phone)

Books

AIDS - Your questions answered, Richard B Fisher, Gay Men's Press.

The AIDS Handbook - Kenneth H Mayer MD and HF Pizer, Bantam Books
(Toronto, New York, London and Sydney).