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Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that infects cells of the immune system, either destroying them or weakening them. If the process progresses far enough, the immune system stops functioning normally. The immune system is considered deficient when it can no longer fulfill its role of fighting infections and diseases.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is the most advanced form of HIV infection. One is regarded as having AIDS once the immune system dysfunction has reached the point where a number of pre-defined illnesses occur.



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

Dr Thapelo Motshudi is a specialist in private practice. He is a consultant for NMG in the areas of Employee Wellness, Occupational Health and any other medical related topics.

1 What are the risk factors?

- Having other sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhoea, syphilis, herpes, etc.
- Unprotected vaginal or anal sex
- Sharing needles and syringes
- Receiving infected blood transfusions or transplant organs
- Accidental needle stick injuries or other exposure among health care workers
- Having multiple sexual partners
- Pregnant women with HIV who do not take prophylaxis or treatment during pregnancy increase the chance of transmitting the disease to their babies.

2 How quickly does a person infected with HIV develop AIDS?

The length of time can vary widely between individuals. Without treatment most people will develop signs of HIV-related illness within 5 – 10 years. The time between acquiring HIV to AIDS is usually around 10 years, but sometimes longer. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) can slow disease progression by preventing the virus from multiplying.

3 How is HIV diagnosed?

HIV is diagnosed by performing a blood test that looks for antibodies produced by an individual as part of the immune system to fight off infections. This is called an HIV ELISA test.

Antibodies are what are commonly referred to as the soldiers of the body and in general each bug that makes us sick has its own type of antibodies. Most people develop antibodies to HIV within 28 days of infection. Antibodies may not be detectable soon after infection. This is the so-called window period. Even though HIV transmission occurs during all stages of infection, this early period of infection represents the time of greatest infectivity.

Once the diagnosis has been confirmed, the stage of infection can be determined. This is done by measuring the CD4 count and the amount of virus in the body, called the viral load. CD4 cells are a type of cell in the immune system which are especially prone to HIV infection.

4 Can I still fall pregnant if I have HIV?

It is possible to give birth to a healthy baby even if you have HIV. Current recommendations are that all pregnant women should be tested and if positive then one should go on treatment. Most HIV drugs are safe during pregnancy. In the absence of treatment, the risk of transmission to the baby can go as high as 30%. The type of delivery will depend on individual circumstances and it should be made in consultation with your gynecologist.

5 Is there a cure for HIV?

No, there is no cure for HIV at the moment. Antiretroviral drugs are used in the treatment and prevention of HIV infection. They fight HIV by stopping or interfering with the reproduction of the virus in the body. One can live for many years on antiretroviral drugs. HIV is considered to be a chronic manageable disease, like diabetes, asthma, and others.

There are many people who claim to be able to cure HIV and there are equally many people who claim to have been cured of HIV by unconventional remedies and treatments, including spiritual interventions. None of these claims have been proven and should not be taken seriously.