

HIV Transmission: Know the Facts

Jaya Bhushan

Department of Virology, Aurabindo University, Patna, India; Email: jayab@gmail.com

Anyone can contract HIV. The virus is transmitted in bodily fluids that include: blood, semen, vaginal and rectal fluids, breast milk.

Some of the ways HIV is transferred from person to person include: through vaginal or anal sex, the most common route of transmission by sharing needles, syringes, and other items for injection drug use by sharing tattoo equipment without sterilizing it between uses during pregnancy, labor, or delivery from a pregnant person to their baby during breastfeeding through “pre-mastication,” or chewing a baby’s food before feeding it to them through exposure to the blood, semen, vaginal and rectal fluids, and breast milk of someone living with HIV, such as through a needle stick.

The virus can also be transmitted through a blood transfusion or organ and tissue transplant. However, rigorous testing for HIV among blood, organ, and tissue donors ensures that this is very rare in the United States. It’s theoretically possible, but considered extremely rare, for HIV to be transmitted through:

Oral sex (only if there are bleeding gums or open sores in the person’s mouth).

Being bitten by a person with HIV (only if the saliva is bloody or there are open sores in the person’s mouth)

Contact between broken skin, wounds, or mucous membranes and the blood of someone living with HIV.

HIV does NOT transfer through:

Skin-to-skin contact

Hugging, shaking hands, or kissing

Air or water

Sharing food or drinks, including drinking fountains

Saliva, tears, or sweats (unless mixed with the blood of a person with HIV)

Sharing a toilet, towels, or bedding

Mosquitoes or other insects

It’s important to note that if a person living with HIV is being treated and has a persistently undetectable viral load, it’s virtually impossible to transmit the virus to another person.

Causes of HIV

HIV is a variation of a virus that can be transmitted to African chimpanzees. Scientists suspect the simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV) jumped from chimps to humans when people consumed chimpanzee meat containing the virus.

Once inside the human population, the virus mutated into what we now know as HIV. This likely occurred as long ago as the 1920s. HIV spread from person to person throughout Africa over the course of several decades. Eventually, the virus migrated to other parts of the world. Scientists first discovered HIV in a human blood sample in 1959.

It’s thought that HIV has existed in the United States since the 1970s, but it didn’t start to hit public consciousness until the 1980s.