

WORTH KNOWING ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

INTRODUCTION

We all know how you get flu. You meet people, shake their hands, exchange the usual pleasantries, and a few days later you are flat on your back. You have caught it. It is not like that with HIV or AIDS. HIV is not transmitted by air-borne germs. HIV is a highly vulnerable virus which cannot survive for long outside the body. It requires intimate contact to be passed on. This can only happen if body fluids loaded with the virus are transferred from one person to another. HIV is passed on by sex, hypodermic syringes, blood or blood products. Sex is far and away the commonest method of transmission.

HIV

HIV is short for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The first known cases of AIDS arose among seamen landing in West Africa back in the sixties. Things have got far worse since: millions of people are suffering from AIDS. There is no known cure.

Sailors have suffered. Many of them caught HIV from having sex abroad. Women have been infected by sailors home and from the sea. It is a real problem.

You can catch it anywhere in the world. Originally the problem was worst in Africa and the Caribbean. The disease has since spread like wildfire through Asia.

If you catch HIV, it is because you deliberately ran a risk. You risk getting HIV if you practice unsafe sex. So as not to get HIV: USE A CONDOM EVERY TIME.

SAFE SEX

Safe sex is sex where you avoid getting sperm, vaginal secretions or blood in your body. Safe sex includes kissing, caressing, whole-body-massage, mutual masturbation, rubbing your sexual organ against your partner's tights, tummy or breasts and licking anywhere on the body except the head of the penis and the vagina.

Wearing a condom for intercourse protects you against HIV. The virus cannot get through rubber. But only if you wear one EVERY TIME from start to finish, and provided it doesn't fall off or burst. And that can happen. So a condom is not a 100 % protection against HIV. Condoms perish faster in tropical heat. Always buy good quality ones. They should be available aboard the ship: ask one of the ship's officers. Make sure they are not out of date or have been stored wrongly.

People infected abroad usually get it via sexual contact. That is why a condom is the best precaution when abroad. You can't tell by looking at a person whether they got HIV.

IT'S SEX THAT DOES IT

The HIV virus cannot survive long outside the body. It needs really intimate contact to be passed on. This can only happen when bodily fluids containing the virus are transferred from one person to another. You

cannot catch HIV by eating other people's food, kissing them, or using their toilets or towels. The risk comes from sperm, vaginal secretions, and blood.

HIV TESTING

If you think you might have got infected, you can have an HIV test done. There are many good reasons for this. The main one being that you can make sure you don't pass the infection on. Another being that you can get early treatment to stop the disease spreading inside you.

Most hospitals and doctors' surgeries have facilities for testing for HIV. It generally takes about a week for the results of the blood tests to come through, because it is tested twice to make sure if it is HIV positive or not. If it is positive you have caught it. A negative result does not necessarily mean you haven't got it. The test sees whether you have any antibodies against the HIV virus in your blood. It may take three months from the date of infection for the antibodies to show up. I.e. a negative result proves you weren't infected three months before, but it can't tell if you caught a dose an hour ago. You can unfortunately infect other people between the time you have caught the virus and the time the test shows positive.

LAW AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

You are protected by law against discrimination if you are infected with HIV. You are not obliged to tell your employer or captain that you are HIV infected.

HOWEVER: For obvious and moral reasons it is a good idea to inform the Captain and sick practitioner when joining the ship.

The captain can at the same time not help you in matters regarding discrimination if he/she is not informed.

HIV DISEASE

About half of everybody infected with HIV show acute HIV disease. The other half won't know they are infected. Acute HIV disease starts with acute fever. At the same time there are flu-like symptoms such as skin rashes, swollen lymph glands, muscular pain, pain when swallowing, fungal infection in the mouth, headaches and fatigue. All these symptoms normally pass off again in a few weeks.

Years may pass with few symptoms, if any.

The person can live a perfectly normal life, do a proper job (such as sailing in overseas trade), pursue recreational interests, be together with the family, friends and colleagues, etc. The odd infection may arise during this time. The most usual symptoms are a rise in temperature, loss of weight and diarrhoea.

When certain symptoms arise in the patient, he is diagnosed as suffering from AIDS. These include tuberculosis, frequent lung infection, persistent fungal infection in the mouth, meningitis, and various forms of cancer.

HIV sufferers are not obliged to tell their employers that they have caught the disease. Nobody needs to give up his job on the grounds of HIV stopping them working properly. There are many people at sea who are HIV positive.

BE AWARE

Having unprotected sex when you know you are HIV positive, but without telling your partner, is considered a criminal offence in many countries – for which you can be prosecuted.