

# What Is HIV/AIDS?

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## What Is HIV?

To understand what HIV is, let's break it down:

**H** – *Human* – This particular *virus* can only infect human beings.

**I** – *Immunodeficiency* – HIV weakens your *immune system* by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection. A "deficient" immune system can't protect you.

**V** – *Virus* – A virus can only reproduce itself by taking over a cell in the body of its host.

*Human Immunodeficiency Virus* is a lot like other viruses, including those that cause the "flu" or the common cold. But there is an important difference – over time, your immune system can clear most viruses out of your body. That isn't the case with HIV – the human immune system can't seem to get rid of it. Scientists are still trying to figure out why.

We know that HIV can hide for long periods of time in the cells of your body and that it attacks a key part of your immune system – your T-cells or CD4 cells. Your body has to have these cells to fight infections and disease, but HIV invades them, uses them to make more copies of itself, and then destroys them. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of your CD4 cells that your body can't fight infections and diseases anymore. When that happens, HIV infection can lead to AIDS.

## What Is AIDS?

To understand what AIDS is, let's break it down:

**A** – *Acquired* – AIDS is not something you inherit from your parents. You **acquire** AIDS after birth.

**I** – *Immuno* – Your body's immune system includes all the organs and cells that work to fight off infection or disease.

**D** – *Deficiency* – You get AIDS when your immune system is "deficient," or isn't working the way it should.

**S** – *Syndrome* – A syndrome is a collection of symptoms and signs of disease. AIDS is a syndrome, rather than a single disease, because it is a complex illness with a wide range of complications and symptoms.

*Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome* is the final stage of HIV infection. People at this stage of HIV disease have badly damaged immune systems, which put them at risk for *opportunistic infections (OIs)*.

You will be diagnosed with AIDS if you have one or more specific OIs, certain cancers, or a very low number of CD4 cells. If you have AIDS, you will need medical intervention and treatment to prevent death.

For more information, see CDC's [Basic Information About HIV And AIDS](#).

## Where Did HIV Come From?

Scientists believe HIV came from a particular kind of chimpanzee in Western Africa. Humans probably came in contact with HIV when they hunted and ate infected animals. Recent studies indicate that HIV may have jumped from monkeys to humans as far back as the late 1800s.

For more information, see CDC's [Where Did HIV Come From?](#)

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## Definitions of terms used on this page:

virus

A microscopic organism that requires a host cell to make more copies of itself. Examples of human

diseases caused by viruses include AIDS, measles, mumps, rubella, polio, influenza, and the common cold.

immune system

The collection of cells and organs whose role is to protect the body from infection and disease.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus

The virus that causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV destroys specific blood cells, called CD4 cells or T-cells, which are crucial to helping the body fight diseases.

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

A disease of the body's immune system caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). AIDS is characterized by the death of CD4 cells (an important part of the body's immune system), which leaves the body vulnerable to life-threatening conditions, such as infections and cancers.

opportunistic infections (OIs)

An illness caused by any one of various organisms that occur in people with weakened immune systems, including people with HIV or AIDS. Common AIDS-related OIs include: pneumonia; other parasitic, viral, and fungal infections; and some types of cancers.

### History of HIV/AIDS



[Watch Video >>](#)

### Frequently Asked Questions

**Do all people with HIV have AIDS?**

No. Being diagnosed with HIV does NOT mean a person will also be diagnosed with AIDS. Healthcare professionals diagnose AIDS only when people with HIV disease begin to get severe opportunistic infections or their CD4 counts fall below a certain level. For more information, see CDC's [Basic Information About HIV And AIDS](#).

**Where did HIV come from?**

Scientists identified a type of chimpanzee in West Africa as the source of HIV infection in humans. The virus most likely jumped to humans when humans hunted these chimpanzees for meat and came into contact with their infected blood. Over several decades, the virus slowly spread across Africa and later into other parts of the world. For more information, see CDC's [Basic Information About HIV And AIDS: Origin Of HIV](#).

[Click Here For More Frequently Asked Questions](#)

### Fact Sheets & Print Materials

- [AIDSinfo – HIV And Its Treatment: What You Should Know](#) (PDF)
- [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases – HIV/AIDS](#)
- [CDC – Rapid HIV Testing](#)

### Additional Resources

- [CDC - Basic Information About HIV/AIDS](#)
- [NIH - Researchers Recall The Early Years of AIDS \(Timeline\)](#)

- NIH - [The Evidence That HIV Causes AIDS](#)
- FDA - [HIV Timeline/History](#)
- AIDSinfo - [Glossary](#)
- AIDSinfo - [Homework Help! Materials To Help You Write Your Papers About HIV And AIDS](#)

[Click Here For HIV/AIDS-Related Resources & Agencies](#)

#### Guidelines

There are no Guidelines associated with this topic.

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