



HIV ➤ HIV, STI and Travel

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6.1 What's your risk of HIV in your home country?

You might think that because you don't know anyone from your home country living with HIV/AIDS, there is little risk of you catching HIV if you have unsafe sex with a person from there.

Think again! HIV/AIDS affects everyone so take care when travelling.

6.2 So what is HIV/AIDS?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This is the virus that causes AIDS.

If you have been infected with HIV you are said to be HIV positive. Once HIV enters the body it attacks and slowly destroys the body's immune system, which normally fights infection and disease.

Over time, often many years, the immune system becomes weaker and so the person becomes ill. Only when a HIV-positive person is diagnosed with one or more illnesses are they said to have AIDS.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. When a person gets ill with a number of unusual infections due to their weak immune system they are said to have AIDS.

There is no cure for HIV/AIDS, but early treatment with special drugs can improve health.

6.3 How HIV is transmitted?

HIV is found in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. Infection only occurs when body fluids from an infected person enter the blood stream of another person.

HIV **can** be transmitted by:

- Unsafe sex (sex without a condom)
- Sharing needles, syringes and other equipment for injecting drugs
- Unsterile body piercing or tattooing
- Mother-to-child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding
- Blood transfusion and/or blood products in some other countries. **In Australia, blood transfusions and blood products are safe.**

HIV **cannot** be transmitted by:

- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Kissing
- Spitting
- Crying
- Sharing cutlery and crockery

- Bed linen
- Toilets
- Showers
- Insects such as mosquitoes.

6.4 What about other sexually transmissible infections (STI)?

STI is sometimes known as venereal disease (VD).

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) such as herpes, genital warts, syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhoea and hepatitis B exist in all countries and cultures.

If you notice:

- Itching
- Blisters
- Unusual discharge
- Burning when peeing
- Pain during sex

You could have an STI, so it's worth seeing a doctor. More importantly, if you have had unprotected sex (did not use a condom) you may have an STI without having any symptoms.

Without treatment, even common STIs, like chlamydia and gonorrhoea, can lead to reduced fertility in men and women.

A refresher

HIV and other STIs are most commonly passed from one person to another by vaginal, anal and oral sex.

Some diseases, such as herpes, are also passed on by close skin contact. HIV and hepatitis B (as well as hepatitis C) are also passed on by blood found in used syringes or unsterile body piercing or tattooing equipment.

Preventing transmission of STIs

Using condoms (with plenty of water-based lubricant) remains the best way to prevent HIV and other STIs being passed on through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Getting effective HIV treatment can also help reduce your risk of transmission to your partner. Talk to your doctor for more information about this.

Condoms

Yes, condoms. Used with plenty of water-based lubricant (like KY jelly or Wetstuff). Condoms are the only form of contraception that reduces the risk of HIV and STIs (as well as pregnancy).

And remember that in certain parts of the world, condoms maybe harder to find than in Australia, so you might want to pack some before you go.

6.5 Tattoos and Piercing

Lots of people go overseas and do things they've always wanted to do. Like getting a tattoo or piercing.

But HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C may easily be passed on using unsterile equipment.

So think twice. Do not be impulsive. Think about waiting until you return to Australia. If you are still keen to go ahead, make sure sterile, preferably single-use equipment is used.

6.6 Injecting Drugs

Another thing you may not have planned for when travelling is using drugs. Drug use is not encouraged, but sometimes it is a reality in people's life.

Injecting carries a risk of contracting blood borne viruses like HIV and hepatitis B and C as well as bacterial infections.

There are safer ways to use, like swallowing, snorting, stuffing (in the anus) or smoking.

If you are injecting, always use new and sterile equipment. In Australia, Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) provide these free.

If you can't get hold of a new equipment, always reuse your own equipment. Never share any injecting equipment, including tourniquets, with other people.

If you have to clean your old needle:

1. Rinse 2 times in fresh clean cold water.
2. Fill with bleach and shake for 30 seconds.
3. Repeat with fresh bleach.
4. Rinse 2 times in fresh clean cold water.

If you can't get hold of sterile water, bottled water may be used as a last resort after boiling, but make sure the bottle is sealed when you buy it.

Never use iodine or water purification tablets.

