

HIV – the facts

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV damages the body's immune system so that it can no longer effectively fight off infections.

HIV is the virus that may result in AIDS but having HIV does not mean you have AIDS.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS was first defined by scientists in the early 1980s as a marker point in the disease process caused by HIV. Over time, HIV damages the body's immune system, leaving people vulnerable to cancers and infections that healthy immune systems beat off. These are called 'opportunistic' infections, because they take the opportunity to cause disease when immune systems are damaged.

The process by which HIV damages the body is very slow, which means that people can live for many years before showing any signs of illness. Even without the benefit of HIV treatment, a person with HIV can be well and live with the virus for many years without developing AIDS. Now that effective treatment is available, AIDS is no longer an inevitable later stage of HIV infection in the many countries where treatment is accessible, including the UK.

Distinguishing between HIV and AIDS in reports

HIV and AIDS are different, and it's important to make this clear. As it is a syndrome, a collection of symptoms, AIDS cannot itself be transmitted, nor can there be an AIDS virus, nor an AIDS carrier. Someone either does or does not have AIDS. There are no degrees of AIDS, so the expression 'full blown AIDS' is meaningless.

Most people in the UK with HIV do not have AIDS, which means that immense care must be taken before describing someone as having AIDS.

Knowing when someone is in pain or distress because of HIV is difficult. The term 'HIV-sufferer' is also seen by most people as patronising, so is best avoided.

Most people who are HIV positive prefer to be referred to as 'people living with HIV' and this is the recommended terminology both in the UK and internationally. Where space is important, use 'people with HIV'.

Since, with the arrival of effective HIV treatments, HIV infection does not necessarily lead to AIDS, it is important to reflect this in reporting. Phrases such as, 'HIV, the deadly virus' or 'HIV, the virus that causes AIDS' are no longer considered accurate. 'HIV/AIDS' as a term is also not accurate as the two diagnoses are very different. Either use the correct term or use 'HIV and AIDS' to differentiate between the two.

Even though HIV and AIDS are different, everyday use of the terms varies greatly between the USA and other parts of the world. Consequently, many reports originating in the USA may well use AIDS inappropriately. Copy from wire services such as AP and Reuters should be read – and, if necessary, subbed – very carefully. In the UK, AP may just 'top-and-tail' other agency copy before sending it on, so it's important to pay attention to all HIV stories on the wires.