

The symptoms of HIV infection

Saleema's story

HIV infection and HIV disease

The first weeks of HIV infection

The quiet stage of HIV infection

The beginning of HIV disease

Answering Saleema's questions



Saleema's story

Saleema is a young mother in a small village in Morocco. She has two children. Her husband works in the nearby fields. Saleema's parents both died when she was very young. When they died her brother, Hamid, moved to Paris, France, to look for work. An uncle there helped him get a job as a taxi driver. It was hard work but Hamid was able to send some money to help Saleema and her sisters. After some time Hamid became tired of his life in the city and returned to the village to work in the fields. Saleema was glad to see him but could not believe how he had changed. He was thin and felt very tired all the time. She wonders what could be wrong with him. He has fevers and sweats at night, and he seems to always have a cough and diarrhea that no medicine will cure. Saleema wants to take him to the doctor. Hamid told her that while in Paris he used drugs to try to take away his loneliness. She asks you, "What could be wrong with Hamid? Why does he have sweats at night and swollen lumps in his armpits and neck? Could this illness be because of the drugs? Should I take him to the doctor?"

HIV infection and HIV disease

HIV damages many parts of a person's body. It can do this in two ways: one is by directly invading different organs, the other is by weakening the immune system and allowing other organisms to cause disease. In this chapter we will describe the first kind of damage that HIV causes; in the Appendix we discuss the second.

HIV directly infects the cells in a person's brain, nervous system, intestines, and blood. HIV damages these cells. This affects the way a person thinks (from damage to the brain), causes pain or numbness in arms and legs (from damage to the nerves), causes diarrhea (from damage to the intestines), and causes anemia and bleeding (from damage to the blood). Although HIV can cause people to be ill, we already know that not everyone with HIV is sick. This is because there are different stages to HIV infection, beginning with the time when a person is first infected, moving through a period when no symptoms are present, reaching a time when symptoms first appear, and ending with advanced HIV disease (AIDS).

The four stages of HIV infection

1. The first few weeks after infection, when many people have symptoms like the flu.
2. The quiet period, when there are few signs of HIV disease.
3. Early HIV disease.
4. Advanced HIV disease (AIDS), when a person is very ill.

Over time, one stage leads to the next.

The first weeks of HIV infection

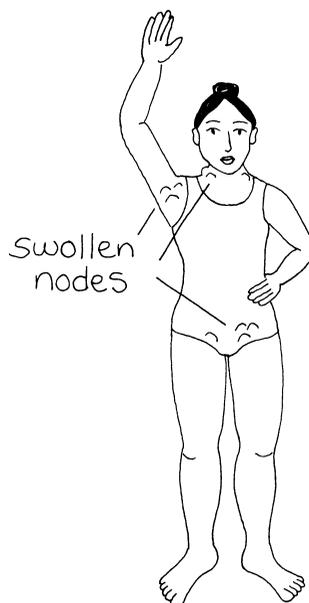
The first stage of HIV infection occurs after a person is infected with the virus. Usually people do not notice when they get HIV; they do not find out that they have the virus until later, when they are tested or become ill. A few people, however, do notice symptoms 1–4 weeks after they are infected with the virus. The symptoms are much like the symptoms of the flu: sore throat, fever, headache, stomach pain, diarrhea, and a feeling of being tired. After a week, a rash may appear on the chest, face, and neck. People may also have night sweats, muscle and joint pains, swelling in their lymph nodes, nausea, and vomiting. These symptoms usually last fewer than two weeks.

Rarely, the first stage of HIV infection can be more serious and damage a person's nervous system. The infected person may develop swelling of the brain and its covering. This can cause headache, neck stiffness, fever, confusion, nervous system problems, and coma. A person may also have problems with the nerves in the arms and legs, and problems with nerves in the face. This can cause pain, numbness, or difficulty moving. The lymph nodes can sometimes swell and stay swollen for months or even years.

Because all of these symptoms are also seen in illnesses other than HIV, we cannot say that a person has HIV just because he has one or more of these symptoms. For a person to know whether he has HIV, he needs to be tested for the virus. Unfortunately, HIV tests do not work well in the first few weeks after infection, because the tests look for antibodies, and the body of someone who has just become infected with HIV has not made antibodies yet. Most people will have antibodies within three weeks of getting HIV. Someone who thinks she may have just been infected with HIV can get tested right away and again a few weeks later. (For more about HIV testing, see Chapters 7 and 8.)

Lymph nodes

Lymph nodes, often called "glands," are the centers of a person's immune system. They become swollen and painful when a person is fighting off an infection. For example, lymph nodes in the neck often swell when a person has a throat infection. HIV also causes swollen lymph nodes, sometimes all over a person's body, and sometimes for years.



The quiet stage of HIV infection

People recover from the first symptoms of HIV infection within a few days or weeks. For several years after that they feel well, look healthy, and carry on with their daily lives. Their immune systems are able to fight the virus.

This is called the “incubation period,” or the quiet stage of HIV. It is the time between the first infection with HIV and the point where a person becomes ill from the virus. For adults, this stage averages ten years. Right now, most of the people in the world who have HIV are in this incubation period. They are not experiencing any symptoms, and many of them do not even know they have the virus and could spread it.



The beginning of HIV disease

After the incubation period, people with HIV become ill. The virus weakens their immune systems enough that they develop infections that people with healthy immune systems are able to fight off. These infections—called “opportunistic infections”—and some cancers are what make people with HIV ill and define their illness as AIDS. We discuss treatments for them in the appendix. At the same time that their immune systems are weakening, people with HIV often develop swollen lymph nodes and lose weight. These general symptoms are common in people with HIV and are often not due to any specific infection.

HIV, weight loss, and malnutrition

Many people live in communities where food is scarce and where malnutrition is a serious problem. Not only do people need enough food, they need different kinds of food. For example, a person who is eating cassava and nothing else will become very ill. If a person is sick from not getting enough of the right kinds of food, he has malnutrition. Malnutrition can cause diseases as well as weight loss. One of the most important ways of staying healthy is to eat well and drink clean water. This is especially true for people with HIV and AIDS. They are likely to become malnourished from constantly being sick, from diarrhea that prevents their bodies from absorbing the nutrients in food, from loss of appetite, and from mouth infections that make eating difficult. Weight loss is so common in people with HIV that in some areas of Africa AIDS is called “slim disease.”

Eating a balanced diet of different foods helps people with HIV stay strong and healthy. A balanced diet is one in which different foods from all of the basic nutrient groups are eaten each day. The basic nutrients are proteins, carbohydrates, fats and oils, and vitamins and minerals.

The basic nutrient groups

Proteins help the body grow and heal. Foods that have high amounts of protein include fish and other seafood, meat (for example, beef, pork, lamb, and goat), fowl (for example, chicken, turkey, and duck), eggs, milk, cheese, beans, rice, peas, cereals, nuts, tofu, and other soybean products.

Carbohydrates give the body energy. Starches and sugars are types of carbohydrates. Starches are in corn, rice, wheat, oats, buckwheat, millet, noodles, plain and sweet potatoes, squash, cassava, plantains, and taro. Sugars are found in sugarcane, beets, refined sugar, candy, honey, and fruit. Starches in potatoes and wheat give the body a steady source of energy. Refined sugars such as candy give the body sugar and no other nutrients. Eating too many sugars can also cause tooth decay and gum disease.

Fats and oils help the body store energy. There is twice as much energy in fat as in protein or carbohydrates. This means that eating fats and oils helps people gain weight. Fats and oils also taste good. The problem with fat for many people is that it causes them to have heart disease and to be overweight. This is usually not a problem for people with HIV, because they are trying to gain weight. Foods with fat include oil, lard, butter, margarine, nuts, sesame, soybean, coconut, avocado, cream, milk, and red meat like beef, pork, and lamb.

Vitamins and minerals are necessary in small amounts for a person's health. They are contained in many different foods, especially vegetables and fruits. This is one reason a varied diet is important for a person's health—it gives a variety of vitamins and minerals.



If someone has trouble eating

People with HIV may have nausea and vomiting. Teas or medicines may help with this. For people with mouth sores, cool, non-spicy foods make eating less painful. For people who have trouble swallowing, moving the head forward and using softer foods will make swallowing easier. Care should be taken when drinking to avoid choking. Drinking through a straw may help. Sometimes problems with eating or swallowing may be due to a disease that can be treated, like a yeast infection in the mouth. In these cases, encourage people to see a health worker for treatment.



Women and children have special nutritional needs. This is because women lose a lot of nutrients through menses, pregnancy, and breast-feeding. Children need extra food because they are growing quickly. Women and children who have HIV need even more food to stay healthy because HIV places more demands on their bodies.

In HIV disease, each infection needs to be treated as well as possible. The Appendix discusses treatments for the most common diseases that affect people with HIV.

Answering Saleema's questions

“What could be wrong with Hamid? Why does he have sweats at night and swollen lumps in his armpits and neck? Could this illness be because of the drugs? Should I take him to the doctor?”

Hamid is very sick and needs to see a doctor to find out what is wrong. The fact that he used drugs while in Paris means he is at high risk for HIV disease, especially if he injected them. People with HIV usually do not know when they got the virus because the first symptoms are like having a bad cold. Later, people have swollen lymph nodes, night sweats, and diarrhea. Hamid has all of these symptoms, and he has lost weight. These are bad signs. If he has HIV, there are medicines that can help him. If Hamid does not have HIV but another disease, like tuberculosis, then he will also need treatment. It is important to find out so that Hamid can get help.