

# ABC OF HIV/AIDS

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This ABC contains terms and acronyms commonly used in writing about HIV/AIDS. In addition to definitions, explanations and examples of use to a wider audience, the symbol ☒: indicates information of particular interest to the media. Words in bold are defined elsewhere in the ABC.

abstinence	Sexual abstinence means refraining from all sexual activity with others.
adolescence	The period of intense emotional and intellectual development between childhood and adulthood, when boys and girls go through the physical changes known as <b>puberty</b> .
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome – the disease caused by <b>HIV</b> .
anal intercourse	Penetration of the anus by the penis. Anal intercourse is practised by men with women and with other men. HIV is twice as likely to be transmitted in <b>unprotected</b> anal intercourse as in vaginal intercourse
antibody	<i>See</i> HIV antibodies.
anti(retro)viral	Having the property of attacking (retro)viruses. <i>See also</i> <b>combination therapy, non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors, nucleoside analogues</b> and <b>protease inhibitors</b> .
ASO	AIDS Service Organisation: usually a community-based <b>non-governmental organisation</b> which undertakes one or more of the following tasks: educating the public about HIV transmission and means of protecting oneself; providing pre-and post-test <b>counselling</b> ; and care of individuals who have contracted HIV or developed AIDS.
asymptomatic	Not having symptoms. People with <b>HIV</b> are asymptomatic until they develop <b>opportunistic infections</b> which mark the onset of AIDS. This asymptomatic period can last 10 years or more.
AZT	Azidothymidine; the earlier name for <b>Zidovudine</b> .
casual sex	In epidemiological terms, casual sex usually defines situations where an individual has more than one sexual partner in a 12-month period. An alternative term, best avoided, is promiscuity.

CD4 cells	A type of blood cell, also known as T-helper cells or T-cells. When the <b>immune system</b> is functioning normally, CD4 cells protect the body by recognising and destroying viruses and bacteria. <b>HIV</b> enters and replicates inside CD4 cells, disabling the body's immune system and eventually leading to the development of <b>AIDS</b> .
circumcision, female	<i>See</i> <b>female genital mutilation</b> .
circumcision, male	The operation which removes the foreskin from the penis. There is some evidence to suggest that circumcised men are less likely to contract and transmit HIV than men who are uncircumcised. Some people believe that male circumcision, though it has fewer harmful consequences than female circumcision, should also be described as genital mutilation.
combination therapy	In HIV/AIDS, combination therapy is the administering of two or three different types of <b>antiretroviral</b> drugs at the same time. Combination therapy is more effective in treating HIV/AIDS than <b>monotherapy</b> .
condom, female	A pouch made of polyurethane inserted into the vagina before intercourse and held in place by a loose inner ring and fixed outer ring. The female condom prevents conception and provides protection from <b>sexually transmitted infections</b> . Unlike the male condom, it does not depend on the man's erection. The female condom, with the inner ring removed, can also be used for protection in <b>anal intercourse</b> with men or women.
condom, male	A sheath unrolled over the erect penis. Male condoms made from latex or polyurethane prevent conception and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.
contaminated blood (products)	In the context of AIDS, any blood or blood products which has been infected with HIV. <b>Screening</b> identifies blood with the virus and prevents it being used in transfusion.
contraception	Any method that prevents a woman from conceiving a child, such as the pill and diaphragm. Of all contraceptive methods, only the male and female condom also offer protection from infection with <b>HIV</b> and other <b>STIs</b> .
cost of treatment ☒	The direct cost of treatment for HIV/AIDS includes: doctors' fees, test fees (for the <b>HIV antibody test</b> , X-rays etc), hospital fees, fees for drugs and other forms of treatment and fees for home and hospice care. <i>See also</i> <b>indirect costs</b> .

counselling	Providing information and advice. Pre-test counselling helps individuals decide whether to take the <b>HIV antibody test</b> . Post-test counselling provides an opportunity for those who test <b>HIV-negative</b> to learn how to protect themselves from future infection, and advises those who test <b>HIV-positive</b> how to maintain their health and how to avoid transmitting the virus to others.
d4T, ddC, ddI	Examples of <b>nucleoside analogue</b> drugs, used in <b>combination therapy</b> to prevent HIV replicating.
diagnosis	Interpretation of a disease. HIV Infection cannot be diagnosed, only confirmed by an <b>HIV antibody test</b> . Diagnosis of AIDS may be made when a patient contracts an <b>opportunistic infection</b> ; where possible, the diagnosis of AIDS should be confirmed, or eliminated, by an HIV antibody test.
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid. The genetical material of most living organisms. <i>See</i> also <b>RNA</b> .
drugs, antiretroviral	<i>See</i> <b>antiretroviral</b> .
drugs, injecting	The term usually refers to the injection of drugs for recreational purposes – either drugs produced only for recreational use, such as heroin, or medicinal drugs injected in combinations or doses intended for recreational use. Non-sterilised <b>injecting equipment</b> carries a high risk of transmission of HIV and other diseases such as Hepatitis.
drugs, recreational	In addition to those which are injected, recreational drugs may be inhaled (eg cocaine, marijuana, tobacco) injected (eg heroin), eaten, chewed or swallowed (eg qat, coca leaf and “ecstasy”) or drunk (eg caffeine, alcohol) to alter physical sensations and mental attitudes. Medicinal drugs may also be misused as recreational drugs. Recreational drugs such as alcohol which make people less likely to protect themselves during sexual intercourse carry an indirect risk of HIV transmission.
dry sex	In some African cultures, women use substances to reduce or prevent flow of vaginal fluid during intercourse because their male partners prefer the sensation of “dry sex”. Dry sex heightens the risk of HIV transmission as it increases the likelihood of bleeding and if a condom is not used.
ELISA	Relatively cheap <b>HIV antibody test</b> . If a blood test is positive, where possible it should be confirmed by the more accurate but more expensive Western Blot test.
faithful	<i>See</i> <b>fidelity</b> .

female genital mutilation	Also known as female circumcision. The partial or full removal of the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora.
fidelity	Faithfulness to one's sexual partner and abstaining from <b>casual</b> sex. Fidelity only protects an individual from HIV when it is mutual – i.e. when both partners are faithful to each other.
gender	While sex describes physical status – whether an individual has a penis and testicles or breasts and vagina – gender describes the socially constructed differences between men and women and the cultural roles which they are expected to fulfil.
heterosexual	<i>See</i> <b>sexual orientation</b> .
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus: HIV is a <b>retrovirus</b> which enters <b>CD4</b> blood cells, where it converts its <b>RNA</b> into <b>DNA</b> by using an enzyme known as reverse transcriptase. This allows the virus to replicate itself. It also disables the body's immune system and eventually leads to the development of <b>AIDS</b> .
HIV antibodies	When confronted with infection, the immune system produces antibodies which circulate in the blood to attack the <b>pathogen</b> . With many diseases, the antibodies overcome the pathogen; in the case of HIV, antibodies are produced but they do not succeed in preventing the virus from replicating.
HIV antibody test	A test to confirm whether an individual has HIV antibodies - and therefore whether they have contracted the virus. A positive result suggests they have contracted HIV. Where possible, a second test is generally used to confirm an initial positive result.
HIV-negative	Not having contracted <b>HIV</b> .
HIV-positive	Having contracted HIV/living with HIV.
homosexual	<i>See</i> <b>sexual orientation</b> .
IAVI	International AIDS Vaccine Initiative: a non-governmental organisation based in New York, with significant funding from Northern government and other sources, whose goal is to support research leading to the development of a vaccine/vaccines that will prevent all or most HIV transmission throughout the developing world.
immune system	The immune system comprises a number of mechanisms to protect the body from disease. These include the lymph glands, which produce <b>CD4</b> cells.
IDU	Injecting drug use(r).

incidence ☒	The incidence of a disease is the rate at which new infections occur, usually expressed in terms of annual increase. HIV incidence of 10% means that 10% more people will contract the virus in a given year than in the previous year.
incubation period	The period between infection with a virus or <b>pathogen</b> and the appearance of symptoms. HIV is unusual in that the incubation period may be ten years or more.
indirect costs ☒	The indirect costs of a disease generally include loss of income from the patient and from those who take time off work to care for the patient, attend their funeral and look after their dependents. Social costs, which may lead to additional economic loss, include such items as loss of schooling by those who care for relatives with the disease and poorer nutrition resulting from lack of income or labour to gather food and prepare meals.
infected ☒	Although this is the word most commonly used to describe an individual who has contracted the virus, many <b>PWA</b> groups prefer to avoid the term and use “living with HIV” instead.
infectious	Capable of infecting others. An individual who has contracted HIV is infectious – through <b>sexual intercourse, contaminated blood, injection equipment or mother-to-child</b> – whether or not they have developed symptoms of AIDS and whether or not they are taking <b>anti(retro)viral</b> drugs.
informed consent	An <b>HIV antibody test</b> should only be undertaken as the result of informed consent—when the individual fully understands, as the result of pre-test <b>counselling</b> , the implications of the test and the possible impact of the result on their lives.
injecting equipment	Usually a manufactured syringe, but the term may refer to any instrument, such as one made from a ballpoint pen, used to inject drugs. Failure to thoroughly sterilise injecting equipment between each use can lead to transmission of HIV and other diseases.
intravenous, ☒ intravenous drug user (IVDU)	Intravenous means into the veins. The term IVDU is no longer used because many individuals who inject drugs inject into a muscle, not into a vein.
Kaposi’s sarcoma	A skin tumour. Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS) is a common <b>opportunistic infection</b> in some population groups in Europe and North America, but uncommon in sub-Saharan Africa.

masturbation	Using one's hand for sexual pleasure, generally to achieve orgasm (sexual climax). Masturbation can be practised alone or on a partner. Solitary masturbation cannot lead to HIV infection; masturbation of a partner can only lead to HIV infection if there is an open cut or lesion on the masturbator's hand or the masturbatee's genital area.
monotherapy	The administering of one type of drug. Monotherapy in HIV is generally not recommended because it can lead to drug resistance and a faster deterioration of the patient's state of health. However, monotherapy is practised to prevent <b>mother-to-child transmission</b> .
morbidity	The <b>incidence</b> of a disease.
mother-to-child transmission	HIV can be transmitted from a mother with the virus to her newborn child in the womb, during birth or through breastfeeding. Transmission occurs in 25% to 40% of cases without prophylactic treatment. If the mother takes <b>Zidovudine</b> (AZT) during the pregnancy and refrains from breastfeeding, transmission rates fall to 10%. Other drugs are being developed to prevent mother-to-child transmission – which is also known as perinatal transmission.
NA(C)P	National AIDS (Control) Programme: government-sponsored body which oversees the national response to HIV/AIDS in each country, working with <b>UNAIDS</b> , <b>non-governmental</b> and other organisations.
non-governmental organisation	Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) vary in size, budget and scope from unpaid volunteers in a small district to large international institutions. Most NGOs are non-profit organisations.
non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors	A type of antiretroviral drug. Non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors prevent HIV from converting its RNA into DNA.
non-penetrative sex	Sexual activity which does not involve penetration of the vagina, anus or mouth. Non-penetrative sex does not allow transmission of HIV unless infected semen or vaginal fluid from one partner comes into contact with a cut or lesion on the other partner's body.
nucleoside analogues	A type of antiretroviral drug. Nucleoside analogues prevent the newly-created DNA of HIV in a disabled CD4 cell from building new virus.
opportunistic infection	Infections which attack the body more easily when the immune system is weakened. Theoretically, any disease can be an opportunistic infection; in practice, the commonest opportunistic infections are: Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC) causing tuberculosis; pneumonia (PCP); herpes viruses; diarrhea; toxoplasmosis.

oral intercourse	Penetration of the mouth by the penis. Practised by women with men and men with other men.
palliative	Palliative treatment relieves suffering but does not cure the underlying condition.
pathogen	Any disease-causing micro-organism. Pathogens include viruses, many bacteria, fungi and protozoans.
perinatal transmission	<i>See</i> <b>mother to child transmission.</b>
pre-test counselling	<i>See</i> <b>counselling.</b>
post-test counselling	<i>See</i> <b>counselling.</b>
prevalence ☒	HIV prevalence is the total number of people with a virus at any one time. In some urban areas, for example, HIV prevalence among adults is over 30% – more than 3 in 10 adults is living with HIV.
prevention programmes	Government or NGO projects or campaigns designed to raise awareness of HIV and the means of preventing transmission, among the general public or a more narrow audience (eg young people, sex workers and their clients, migrant labourers etc).
prophylactic	A prophylactic measure is one which prevents spread of a disease. Prophylaxis is sometimes also used to mean contraception.
prostitution	<i>See</i> <b>sex work.</b>
protease inhibitors	A type of antiretroviral drug. Protease inhibitors prevent HIV from being released from infected CD4 cells.
protected	Protected sexual intercourse means intercourse with a condom.
puberty	Puberty refers to the physical, including sexual, changes that occur when a child reaches adulthood. <i>See</i> also <b>adolescence.</b>
PWA / PLWA / PLWHA	P(L)WA: person (living) with AIDS (i.e.: having developed the symptoms of AIDS). PLWHA: person living with HIV/AIDS (whether or not they have symptoms of AIDS).
Retrovir	Trade name for Zidovudine.
retrovirus	<i>See</i> <b>virus.</b>

risk	Risk of HIV transmission occurs in any situation where the virus may be transmitted from one individual to another – <i>e.g.</i> in an act of unprotected intercourse or when unscreened blood is transfused.
RNA	Ribonucleic acid. An organic compound storing genetic information.
screen	Screening blood means testing blood for the presence of HIV antibodies.
semen / seminal fluid	The penis ejaculates semen, the liquid which contains sperm, the male contribution to conception. Infected semen is the primary route through which men transmit HIV to their sexual partners.
seroconversion	The moment at which an infection enters the bloodstream and the individual converts from seronegative to seropositive (in the context of HIV/AIDS, converts from HIV-negative to HIV-positive).
seronegative	Without a specified pathogen in the blood. In the context of HIV/AIDS, seronegative is the same as HIV-negative.
seropositive	With a specified pathogen in the blood. In the context of HIV/AIDS, seropositive is the same as HIV-positive.
serostatus	Literally “state of the blood”. In the context of HIV, the term indicates whether a person has contracted the virus or not.
sex work ☒	Sex work, often referred to as prostitution, is the exchange of sexual intercourse or other sexual activity for money or goods. Both women and men can be sex workers; the clients are almost always men.
sexual activity	Any activity, alone or with a partner, which involves direct or indirect stimulation of the sexual organs.
sexual identity	Most individuals identify themselves as men/masculine or women/feminine. In every culture, however, a few individuals either wish to change their sexual identity or consider they have elements of both sexes in their psychological and/or physical make-up. <i>See also gender.</i>
sexual intercourse	The definition of sexual intercourse can vary according to the speaker. Some people consider only vaginal intercourse as sexual intercourse and see anal intercourse and oral intercourse as forms of sexual activity. Vaginal, anal and oral intercourse may all lead to transmission of HIV if a condom is not used.

sexual orientation ☒	Refers to an individual's pattern of sexual attraction. In Western terms, individuals are seen as heterosexual (attracted to the opposite sex), homosexual (attracted to the same sex) or bisexual (attracted to both sexes). In other cultures, <b>sexual identity</b> and sexual orientation are often defined differently.
sexually transmitted disease	<i>See</i> <b>sexually transmitted infection.</b>
sexually transmitted infection	An STI (also known as sexually transmitted disease or STD) is any infection only or primarily transmitted through sexual intercourse. STIs which cause lesions or ulcers, such as gonorrhoea, multiply the risk of transmitting HIV up to sevenfold.
social marketing ☒	Male and female condoms are sold through social marketing in many parts of Africa. This comprises an affordable, subsidised price and marketing and sales similar to commercial items such as beers and other products. This approach increases sales and helps to remove the stigma of condoms and sexual intercourse.
STD or STI	<i>See</i> <b>sexually transmitted infection.</b>
stigma ☒	A mark of social disgrace.
Sugar Daddy, Sugar Mommy	In some cultures the slang term used for older men who pay, directly or in kind, for the sexual services of younger women, or for older women who similarly pay for the services of younger men.
symptomatic	Having symptoms. A person with HIV is <b>asymptomatic</b> ; a person with AIDS is symptomatic.
taboo	Contrary to a society's customs and / or laws. Despite taboos, many sexual practices such as oral and anal intercourse exist in many, if not all, societies.
T-(helper) cells	<i>See</i> <b>CD4 cells.</b>
testing	<i>See</i> <b>HIV antibody testing and counselling.</b>
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS co-ordinating the global response to HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS is sponsored by seven UN agencies: the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), UN Population Fund (UNFPA) the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

unprotected	Unprotected intercourse is intercourse without use of a male or female condom. Unprotected intercourse can lead to transmission of HIV and other STIs.
unscreened	Unscreened blood has not been tested for HIV antibodies and may carry HIV. <i>See also screen.</i>
vaccine	A preparation of disease-producing micro-organisms, or their parts, used to stimulate immune response and raise the body's resistance to a disease. There is currently no vaccine that prevents individuals from contracting HIV; vaccine development, co-ordinated by IAVI, is a global priority.
vaginal fluid	Fluid produced by the mucous membrane – lining – of the vagina. In some African cultures vaginal fluid is welcomed by both partners. In other cultures women are encouraged to find means of restricting vaginal fluid because men prefer dry sex.
vaginal intercourse	Penetration of a vagina by a penis.
viral load	The quantity of virus in the bloodstream. The viral load of HIV is measured by sensitive tests, unavailable in most of Africa. Ability to measure viral load is a key component in effective combination therapy.
virus	A micro-organism which is capable of independent life and reproduction within a living cell. Most viruses store the genetic information they need to reproduce in DNA. Retroviruses, such as HIV, store their genetic information in RNA.
wasting syndrome	Term used to define the rapid loss of weight that often accompanies the development of AIDS.
Western Blot	<i>See ELISA.</i>
window period	It takes the immune system up to three months to produce antibodies to HIV that can be measured in the HIV antibody test. During this window period, an individual tests negative for the virus but is nevertheless capable of transmitting it to others.
Zidovudine	The first developed and most commonly known nucleoside analogue; commonly known as AZT.