

## What is AIDS? By Avert

AIDS stands for: **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**

AIDS is a medical condition. A person is diagnosed with AIDS when their immune system is too weak to fight off infections.

Since [AIDS was first identified](#) in the early 1980s, an unprecedented number of people have been affected by the [global AIDS epidemic](#). Today, there are an estimated [33 million people living with HIV/AIDS](#).



## What causes AIDS?

AIDS is caused by [HIV](#).

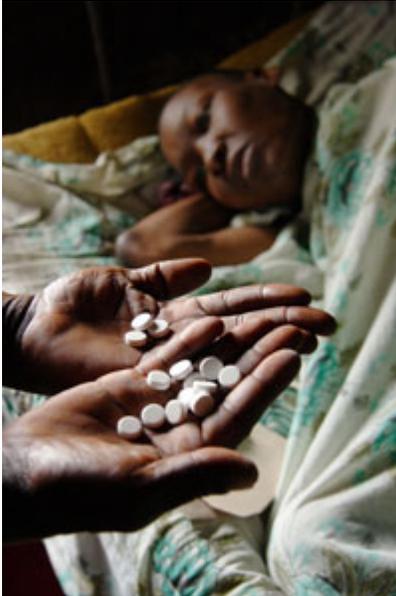
HIV is a virus that gradually attacks immune system cells. As HIV progressively damages these cells, the body becomes more vulnerable to infections, which it will have difficulty in fighting off. It is at the point of very advanced HIV infection that a person is said to have AIDS. It can be years before HIV has damaged the immune system enough for AIDS to develop.

## What are the symptoms of AIDS?

A person is diagnosed with AIDS when they have developed an AIDS-related condition or symptom, called an [opportunistic infection](#), or an AIDS-related cancer. The infections are called 'opportunistic' because they take advantage of the opportunity offered by a weakened immune system.

It is possible for someone to be [diagnosed with AIDS](#) even if they have not developed an opportunistic infection. AIDS can be diagnosed when the number of immune system cells (CD4 cells) in the blood of an HIV positive person drops below a certain level.

## Can AIDS be treated?



A community health worker gives an HIV positive patient antiretroviral drugs, Kenya

[Antiretroviral treatment](#) can prolong the time between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS. Modern combination therapy is highly effective and someone with HIV who is taking treatment could live for the rest of their life without developing AIDS.

An AIDS diagnosis does not necessarily equate to a death sentence. Many people can still benefit from [starting antiretroviral therapy](#) even once they have developed an AIDS-defining illness. Better treatment and prevention for opportunistic infections have also helped to improve the quality and length of life for those diagnosed with AIDS.

Treating some opportunistic infections is easier than others. Infections such as herpes zoster and candidiasis of the mouth, throat or vagina, can be managed effectively in most environments. On the other hand, more complex infections such as toxoplasmosis, need advanced medical equipment and infrastructure, which are lacking in many resource-poor areas.

It is also important that treatment is provided for [AIDS-related pain](#), which is experienced by almost all people in the very advanced stages of HIV infection.

## Is there a cure for AIDS?

Worryingly, many people think there is a 'cure' for AIDS - which makes them feel safer, and perhaps take risks that they otherwise wouldn't. However, there is still [no cure for AIDS](#). The only way to stay safe is to be aware of [how HIV is transmitted](#) and how to [prevent HIV infection](#).

## How many people have died from AIDS?

Since the first cases of AIDS were identified in 1981, more than 25 million people have died from AIDS.

## Why do people still develop AIDS today?

Even though antiretroviral treatment can prevent the onset of AIDS in a person living with HIV, many people are still diagnosed with AIDS today. There are four main reasons for this:

- In many resource-poor countries [antiretroviral treatment is not widely available](#). Even in wealthier countries, such as [America](#), many individuals are not covered by health insurance and cannot afford treatment.
- Some people who became infected with HIV in the early years of the epidemic before combination therapy was available, have subsequently developed drug resistance and therefore have limited treatment options.
- Many people are never [tested for HIV](#) and only become aware they are infected with the virus once they have developed an AIDS-related illness. These people are at a higher risk of mortality, as they tend to respond less well to treatment at this stage.
- Sometimes people taking treatment are unable to [adhere](#) to, or tolerate the [side effects](#) of drugs.

## Caring for a person with AIDS

In the later stages of AIDS, a person will need [palliative care](#) and [emotional support](#). In many parts of the world, friends, family and AIDS organisations provide [AIDS care in the home](#). This is particularly the case in countries with high HIV prevalence and overstretched healthcare systems.

[End of life care](#) becomes necessary when a person has reached the very final stages of AIDS. At this stage, preparing for death and open discussion about whether a person is [going to die](#) often helps in addressing concerns and ensuring final wishes are followed.

## The global AIDS epidemic

Around 2.7 million people became infected with HIV in 2007 and in the same year 2 million people died from AIDS. Sub-Saharan [Africa](#) has been hardest hit by the epidemic; in 2007 around three quarters of AIDS deaths were in this region.



Parc de l'espoir - AIDS Memorial Park in Montreal, Canada

The epidemic has had a devastating impact on societies, economies and infrastructures. In countries most severely affected, life expectancy has been reduced by as much as 20 years. Young adults in their productive years are the most at-risk population, so many countries have faced a slow-down in economic growth and an increase in household poverty. In [Asia](#), HIV/AIDS causes a greater loss of productivity than any other disease. An adult's most productive years are also their most reproductive and so many of the age group who have died from AIDS have left children behind. In sub-Saharan Africa the AIDS epidemic has [orphaned](#) nearly 12 million children.

In recent years, the response to the epidemic has been intensified; in the past ten years in low- and middle-income countries there has been a 6-fold increase in [spending for HIV and AIDS](#). The number of people on antiretroviral treatment has increased, the annual number of AIDS deaths has declined, and the global percentage of people infected with HIV has stabilised.

However, recent achievements should not lead to complacent attitudes. In all parts of the world, people living with HIV still face AIDS-related [stigma and discrimination](#), and many people still cannot access sufficient HIV treatment and care. In [America](#) and some countries of [Western and Central](#) and [Eastern Europe](#), infection rates are rising, indicating that [HIV prevention](#) is just as important now as it ever has been. Prevention efforts that have proved to be effective need to be scaled-up and treatment targets reached. Commitments from national governments right down to the community level need to be intensified and subsequently met, so that one day the world might see an end to the global AIDS epidemic.

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