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HIV and Specific Populations

HIV and Women

Last Reviewed: March 30, 2020

Key Points

- According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), in 2016, 23% of people living with HIV in the United States were women.
- The most common way that women get HIV is through sex with a male partner who has HIV.
- Several factors can increase the risk of HIV in women. For example, during vaginal or anal sex, a woman has a greater risk for getting HIV because, in general, receptive sex is riskier than insertive sex.
- Women with HIV take HIV medicines during pregnancy and childbirth to prevent [mother-to-child transmission of HIV](#) and to protect their own health.

Does HIV affect women?

Yes. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), in 2016, 23% of people living with HIV in the United States were women.

The CDC also reports that:

- Among all women who were living in the United States and six dependent areas and who received an HIV diagnosis in 2017, 59% were black/African American.
- The most common way that women get HIV is through sex with a male partner who has HIV.

- Most women who have HIV know that they are HIV positive, but some women are not getting the HIV care and treatment they need.

Treatment with HIV medicines (called [antiretroviral therapy or ART](#)) helps people with HIV live longer, healthier lives. ART also reduces the risk of [HIV transmission](#).

HIV medicines are recommended for everyone who has HIV. People should start taking HIV medicines as soon as possible after their HIV is diagnosed.

What factors put women at risk for HIV?

HIV is spread through the blood, pre-seminal fluids, semen, vaginal fluids, rectal fluids, or breast milk of a person who has HIV.

In the United States, the main risk factors for HIV transmission are the following:

- Having anal or vaginal sex with a person who has HIV without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV
- Sharing injection drug equipment (works), such as needles, with a person who has HIV

Several factors can increase the risk of HIV in women. For example, during vaginal or anal sex, a woman has a greater risk for getting HIV because, in general, receptive sex is riskier than insertive sex. Age-related thinning and dryness of the vagina may also increase the risk of HIV in older women. A woman's risk of HIV can also increase if her partner engages in high-risk behaviors, such as injection drug use or having sex with other partners without using condoms.

Are there any issues that affect HIV treatment in women?

Treatment with HIV medicines is recommended for everyone with HIV. However, birth control and pregnancy are two issues that can affect HIV treatment in women.

Birth control

Some HIV medicines may reduce the effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives, such as birth control pills, patches, rings, or implants. Women taking certain HIV medicines may have to use an additional or different form of birth control. For more information, view the [AIDSinfo HIV and Birth Control](#) infographic.

Pregnancy

Women with HIV take HIV medicines during pregnancy and childbirth to reduce the risk of [mother-to-child transmission of HIV](#) and to protect their own health.

The choice of an [HIV regimen](#) to use during pregnancy depends on several factors, including a woman's current or past use of HIV medicines, other medical conditions she may have, and the results of [drug resistance testing](#). In general, pregnant women with HIV can use the same HIV regimens recommended for non-pregnant adults—unless the risk of any known side effects to a pregnant woman or her baby outweighs the benefits of a regimen.

Sometimes a woman's HIV regimen may change during pregnancy. Women and their health care providers should discuss whether any changes need to be made to an HIV regimen during pregnancy.

This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

From CDC:

- [HIV Among Women](#)
- [HIV Transmission](#)

From the Department of Health and Human Services:

- Guidelines for the Use of Antiretroviral Agents in Adults and Adolescents with HIV:
 - [HIV and the Older Person](#)
 - [Women with HIV](#)
- Recommendations for the Use of Antiretroviral Drugs in Pregnant Women with HIV Infection and Interventions to Reduce Perinatal HIV Transmission in the United States:
 - [General Principles Regarding Use of Antiretroviral Drugs During Pregnancy: Overview](#)
 - [Recommendations for Use of Antiretroviral Drugs During Pregnancy: Overview](#)