

## HIV TRANSMISSION: WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

**FACT:** A person living with HIV who is adhering fully to their medication will ideally achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load, which means there is virtually no risk of them transmitting the virus according to current research.

**FACT:** There is high risk of transmission if an HIV-positive person is either not taking medication or not adhering properly to their medicines. Or perhaps doesn't even know they are HIV positive.

**FACT:** Oral sex carries a much lower risk than vaginal or anal sex, but HIV can still be passed on through cuts or ulcers in the mouth if they come into contact with infected semen, blood, vaginal fluids, anal mucus or breast milk of a person who is living with a high viral load. A man ejaculating in their partner's mouth increases the risk of infection if cuts or ulcers are present.

**FACT:** In the UK, a pregnant woman living with HIV should not transmit the virus to her foetus if she is taking the right medication correctly. She would be recommended not to breastfeed the baby once it was born. In the UK all pregnant women are offered an antenatal HIV test and if found to be HIV-positive they are referred to an HIV specialist to support their pregnancy and aftercare.

### High Risk

- Having unprotected sex with someone. Unprotected sex makes you vulnerable to other sexually transmitted infections not just HIV.
- Sharing needles, syringes or other injecting drug equipment
- A pregnant woman living with HIV has a high risk of transmitting the virus to her foetus (known as Mother to Child Transmission MTCT) during pregnancy if she is not adhering to her medication to manage the HIV virus during her pregnancy.
- A pregnant woman living with HIV has a high risk of transmitting the virus to her baby if she does not take her medication as prescribed by her doctor. Adhering to prescribed medication is a particular challenge for some people and is crucial if the virus is to be suppressed.
- A woman living with HIV has a high risk of transmitting the virus to her baby through breastfeeding.
- Doing your own tattoos with friends using a home tattoo kit or with equipment that has not been sterilised – it's basically the same issue as sharing needles for injecting drug use.

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### Low Risk

- Giving oral sex to a man living with HIV. Oral sex carries a much lower risk than vaginal or anal sex, but HIV can still be transmitted through cuts or ulcers in the mouth if it comes into contact with infected blood, semen, anal mucus or vaginal fluids. The level of risk also depends on the viral load of the man living with HIV and whether he is taking medication as prescribed by a doctor. There is no data to suggest HIV can be transmitted by giving oral sex to a woman.

### No Risk

- Hugging and kissing a person living with HIV.
- Sharing a drinking cup or cutlery with a person living with HIV.
- Having a tattoo using sterile equipment. Think about how you know if a tattoo parlour is reputable and sterilises equipment. If you're not sure, then this could be high risk.