

19 Is there a vaccine for HIV/AIDS?



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No. There is no vaccine for HIV or for AIDS.

You may have heard that scientists are trying to find a vaccine to prevent HIV infections but most experts believe that such a vaccine won't be achieved for many years. Recently, there have been promising breakthroughs in research on vaccines that reduce viral load (the amount of HIV in the body), thereby decreasing chances of spreading the virus. A vaccine to prevent HIV, however, may still be years away.

What are scientists doing?

- they are trying to make a vaccine that will prevent HIV infection
- they are looking for ways to stop people from getting sick after they have HIV (finding a way to protect our cells from the effects of HIV is more like treatment than vaccination).

What problems are scientists facing?

- there are many strains of the HIV virus
- there's little information about how strong a person's immune system has to be in order to prevent HIV infection
- testing any medication or vaccine takes a long time—after scientists test medications on animals, they need test it on humans. Tests on humans are called clinical trials, and these often raise ethical issues (e.g. Who will be chosen to test the new vaccines? How can we make sure they will be safe during the tests? What if the medication makes the illness worse?) Clinical trials also need to involve large numbers of people.

If and when scientists find a vaccine, there will be more questions—What are the side effects and risks? Who should get the vaccine? How much will it cost?

Should I continue to take precautions?

Yes! Some people think that, because vaccine research is occurring and new treatments are being produced, they don't have to worry about HIV infection and that HIV/AIDS is just a treatable chronic disease. This is not true. There still is no cure or medical prevention for HIV. The best prevention is to reduce the risks of coming into contact with the virus.

Even if a vaccine is found one day, it won't replace the need to practice safer sex or avoid other activities that increase the risk of HIV infection, such as sharing needles to inject drugs. Vaccines are never 100% effective and not everyone will be vaccinated prior to infection.

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1
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