



# The Risk of AIDS while Travelling



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## General

Since the early 1980's a new disease has been recognised which has now spread across every continent in what can only be described as a pandemic. The disease has devastated the health of entire populations and affects young and old, educated and uneducated and both rich and poor. The latest statistics from WHO suggest that over 40 million individuals are infected with HIV/AIDS and that this number may be a gross underestimate of the actual situation.

## AIDS - the disease

The AIDS syndrome is caused by a virus which affects the body's immune system in such a way that other infections may take hold and become overwhelming, leading to death. It is an extremely serious disease and, despite extensive research, still not fully understood. The length of time it takes for the virus to damage the body's immune system varies greatly from person to person, but may take from just a few short months to many years. During this period of time the individual will frequently have no signs or symptoms of the disease within their body, but they may still be able to pass the virus to others.

## AIDS - method of transmission

The HIV virus which causes AIDS is primarily transmitted through sexual activity. The virus is also spread through contact with contaminated blood—in transfusions or on needles or where any skin piercing instruments may be used. HIV may also be transmitted from mother to the newly born child either during delivery or shortly after birth. HIV transmission does not occur through simple casual contact with an infected person. Current research shows that the virus is not transmitted through swimming pools, toilet seats, cutlery, coughing, holding / shaking hands, hugging, kissing or via mosquito bites. The virus may be transmitted on the first intimate sexual contact or the use of a contaminated needle.

## AIDS - the traveller

AIDS occurs throughout the world. Nevertheless the risk of contracting the virus for the general holiday maker is very small and in almost every case associated with sexual encounters, frequently after over-consumption of alcohol. It is essential to take special care if you are involved in contact sports where a severe injury may require an individual to have a blood transfusion—rock climbing, rugby and other field games etc.

## AIDS - the Relief and Development worker

Those undertaking healthcare based work overseas will have a higher than normal risk of having blood and body fluid exposure. This can occur through vaccination programmes and while involved in surgery or obstetrics. The other particular risk which may occur is if the worker becomes ill and requires blood tests or fluid transfusion. **Road accidents** are a further significant risk and great care is required at all times especially while driving. Nevertheless, despite even the best precautions, travellers away from home do run added risks and thus, following some simple rules is certainly worthwhile.

## Precautions

Remember people who are capable of transmitting the AIDS virus may look and feel perfectly healthy.

- ❑ **Do not engage in any sexual activity unless you are certain that the other party has a blameless past. A very rare occurrence.**
- ❑ **Remember a condom does NOT give complete protection.**
- ❑ **Any blood transfusion should be absolutely avoided unless there is certainty that the blood has been screened for the AIDS virus and is known to be safe.**
- ❑ **Know your blood group before you travel and also the blood groups of others within your party, if possible.**
- ❑ **Adequate Travel & Medical insurance should be taken out before you travel so that in an emergency you can be flown home.**
- ❑ **Avoid injections unless they are absolutely necessary. Very often tablets can be used instead. If an injection is essential then ensure that the needle and syringe are sterile.**
- ❑ **Remember any skin piercing instrument (use used for tattoo, ear-piercing equipment, acupuncture or even the dentist's tools) must always be sterile as the risk of contamination by HIV (or other blood borne viruses eg Hepatitis B/C) might otherwise occur. In general do not undergo any skin piercing procedure while abroad, unless essential.**

**Alcohol is frequently consumed to an excess while on holiday. This may make an individual less aware of the risks involved in sexual contacts.**

## The traveller with AIDS

If you are already infected with the **AIDS virus**, then consult a specialist travel centre or your doctor **early** before your planned itinerary. Just because you have the virus does not mean you cannot travel, but perhaps some extra care may be required with your vaccinations for your own safety. Remember that medical facilities abroad may be limited and if you should become ill, then adequate care may be difficult to obtain in many areas.

## Summary

The spread of HIV/AIDS throughout our world has been rapid and unrelenting. Increased public awareness of the condition has helped to contain the spread of the disease in certain quarters but nevertheless in order to continue our fight against the virus **it is extremely important that all travellers are fully aware of the risks** and implications involved in certain high risk activities particularly while they are away from home. If you have recently returned from abroad and are concerned about this issue please contact the Tropical Medical Bureau staff or your local general practitioner or for further advice.

## Remember

- ❑ **Prevention is Vital - There is still No Cure!**

National Travel Vaccine Appointment Tel 1-850-48 76 74

Web Address: <http://www.tmb.ie>

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from W.H.O. Center for Disease Control (US) and other International sources.

- ✓ Travel Accessories
- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

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