HIV – MODES OF TRANSMISSION, SYMPTOMS, AND PREVENTION

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an incurable virus, which will lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, better known as AIDS. The virus itself does not kill, but weakens the immune system so that other diseases can exist inside the body. It is the other diseases which eventually cause death. The symptoms of HIV include weight loss, pneumonia, recurrent fever, memory loss, and spots in the mouth. However, a person exposed to HIV may have no symptoms for years.

HIV is transmitted through blood and certain other body fluids. The most common modes of transmission are sexually and through sharing needles.

HIV is a fairly weak virus that cannot live long outside the human body. In the body HIV has low concentration in the cells, so that it is unlikely to be transmitted unless there is an actual mixing of body fluids or other direct route. There have been no known transmissions of HIV from contact with environmental surfaces.

Once a person has contracted HIV, there is no cure, so knowing how to prevent transmission is very important. Other than sexual transmission, and injection of the virus by a needle, open cut, or other break in the skin, HIV can be transmitted through the mucous membranes, such as in the eyes or mouth. Another way that the virus has been transmitted is through blood transfusions, if the donor blood is HIV positive.

Once a person has been exposed to HIV, they will usually have an episode known as Acute Retroviral Syndrome (ARS), within twelve weeks of the exposure. Although this usually happens, there have been cases when it does not. An ARS episode usually resembles flu-like symptoms, such as fever, abdominal cramps, nausea, etc., and usually does not last more than a few days. A person can transmit HIV to others even before an ARS episode, or if one never occurs.

Before the ARS episode, the individual may test negative for HIV, but seroconversion usually occurs with the onset of the ARS, and the individual will usually test positive afterwards. That is why it is very important, if you think you may have been exposed to blood or body fluids, that you report any fever or flu-like illness up to twelve weeks after a possible exposure.

After acquiring AIDS, the most common type of illnesses encountered are pneumonia-like illnesses, other respiratory problems, and certain types of cancer.

Although very few cases of occupationally-acquired HIV transmission have been reported, most have occurred after accidental needle sticks or splashing of blood in the eyes or open cuts.

The best way to prevent transmission of HIV on the job is to regard ALL blood, body fluids, or other potentially infectious materials as contaminated, and take all necessary precautions.