



HTLV – 1 Virus

What is HTLV-1?

Human T-Lymphotropic Virus Type 1 (HTLV)-1 is a virus that infects the white cells in the blood in humans. It can cause a disease of the nervous system and leukemia.

Is this a new disease?

We've known about this disease for some time (first described in 1980). It has been identified throughout the world.

It is more common in Japan, the Western Pacific, the Caribbean, West Africa and South America, with about 10-20 million people infected worldwide. It is rare in Canada but has been found in persons in British Columbia and Nunavut.

How can you tell if you have HTLV-1?

About 1 in 20 people who get infected by HTLV-1 will eventually get sick with HTLV-1-associated illness in their lifetime, but often not until several decades after being infected.

All the rest of the people carrying the virus do not get symptoms or develop any health problems from this virus.

People who get sick may develop a loss of strength in the lower limbs, loss of bladder control, or develop leukemia.

There is a blood test for HTLV-1 that you can get through your doctor.

How is the virus spread?

HTLV-1 is spread from an infected person to another by:

- Sharing needles, syringes or “rigs” or other equipment used for injecting drugs;
- Sexual contact. Evidence suggests that the virus is more easily transmitted from men to women than from women to men, especially from middle age on;
- Mother to child. About one quarter of mothers who are infected with HTLV-1 may transmit the virus to their babies at birth or through breastfeeding, especially if they breastfeed for six months or more.

Should you breastfeed?

If you are infected with HTLV-1 you should not breastfeed. If you are at high-risk, you should be tested. Otherwise, breastfeeding is highly recommended. Breast milk is one of nature's most perfect foods.

How can you protect yourself against infection from HTLV-1?

Everyone should take the same precautions to protect themselves against infection from HIV or hepatitis B apply to HTLV-1.

In other words:

- Don't share needles, rigs or other drug injection equipment.
- Always use a latex condom, especially if you're having sex with more than one person.

As with HIV and hepatitis B, there is evidence that HTLV-1 is NOT spread by ordinary, everyday household contacts such as kissing, using the toilet or preparing food. In order for the disease to spread, there has to be blood-to-blood contact or sexual intercourse.

Is there any treatment for HTLV-1 infection?

There is no present treatment which will get rid of the virus once you are infected with it.

Can you get HTLV-1 from blood transfusions?

Canadian Blood Services (formerly Canadian Red Cross) has been screening all blood donations for HTLV-1 since April 1990 and transmission of HTLV via transfusion has been virtually eliminated in Canada.

Should you get tested?

No, unless you have a disease for which your doctor thinks testing is needed, or you have been in contact with a known case.



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