

Tips for Dancers: Living with HIV and Preventing HIV Infection

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s had a great impact on the dance community. We mourn the loss of a generation of mentors, teachers, and heroes. Since the 1980's, there have been significant advances in clinical and scientific research. This has broadened our ability to prevent, manage, and treat HIV infections. It is estimated there are 37 million people living with HIV worldwide. Rather than being a death sentence, it is now considered a chronic medical condition that can be controlled with medication.

Dancers in the early days of the epidemic were starting to embrace new styles of dancing that encouraged more physical contact, like contact improvisation. During that time, we did not know all the ways HIV could move from one person to the next. Some people were scared to be in the same room as another person with HIV. It was an isolating experience for our community. Many of our initial fears have been proven false, and the stigma of living with HIV is gradually disappearing.

We do know that dancing is not a risk factor for contracting HIV. That being said, it is important for dancers to have a basic understanding of the risk factors and treatments for HIV infection. Dance is an athletic activity where small cuts and scrapes are common. Understanding basic techniques for taking **standard precautions** can give all people peace of mind when such events occur.

Preventing HIV Infection

Risk factors for contracting HIV include having multiple sexual partners, especially when those partners are also at a high risk of infection. Injecting drugs directly into the bloodstream by means of a needle is another high-risk activity. However, having a sexual partner with HIV who consistently takes his/her HIV medication and has an undetectable level of the virus would not be considered high-risk. **In these cases, there is effectively no risk of transmitting HIV to the HIV-negative sexual partner.** This is sometimes called "**Treatment as Prevention**" (TasP).

HIV **cannot** be transmitted through sweat or saliva. The virus is unstable, meaning it cannot survive, when exposed to surfaces outside the body. HIV **cannot** be transmitted through casual contact, swimming pools, mosquitos, tears, urine, stool, or inanimate objects like dance floors, costumes, toilet seats, or sinks. Sharing objects like razors and toothbrushes may carry a risk of infection, so this should be avoided.

Testing/Screening

It is not recommended to require that all dancers in a school or company be tested for HIV. The risk of infection is just too low. However, voluntary screening is recommended for all individuals who are at risk. Many choose to have the testing performed at a primary care clinic to better coordinate care. It is important that someone is available to answer any questions you may have about the results.

Living with HIV

HIV treatment has led to great improvements in the health, quality of life, and life expectancy for those people living with HIV. Many people with HIV are great dancers and serve as positive role models for our dance community. Undergoing treatment so that the virus levels in the blood are very low is the best thing people with HIV can do to stay healthy. In most cases, people can completely suppress the virus by taking medicine daily as prescribed. It is important to frequently monitor levels of the virus with regular blood work. **TasP** significantly decreases any transmission of the virus to another person.

Exercise, including dance, has been found to be beneficial to the health and well-being of individuals infected with HIV. Moderate aerobic exercises can help those with HIV maintain healthy levels of immune (CD4) cells and decrease metabolic problems, like obesity, elevated cholesterol, and diabetes. It can have positive effects on thinking and mood. Even dancers with more advanced stages of HIV infection can benefit from regular exercise.

Standard Precautions for Potential Exposure to Bloodborne Pathogens

Preparation (Dancer)	Dancers should care for pre-existing injuries and completely cover any healing cuts or scrapes with an occlusive dressing. For most wounds, simple Band-aids or gauze applied with paper tape should be enough to cover the area.
Preparation (Studio/Company)	All dance studios should stock supplies to reduce blood exposures, including Latex or vinyl gloves, soap/disinfectant, bleach (freshly prepared in a 1:10 dilution with tap water) or an EPA-approved germicide, bandages and dressings, and designated receptacles for soiled dressings.
Preparation (Staff)	Teachers and company staff (especially on-site clinical staff like physical therapists or athletic trainers) should have training in basic first aid and infection control, including measures outlined here. Staff should have a clear place to refer dancers with injuries that cannot be treated on-site.
Recognize Bleeding Early	Stop dancing immediately and control any bleeding. Use gloves when coming into direct contact with blood or bodily fluids.
Maintain a Safe Environment	Notify others to stop dancing if there is blood on the floor or equipment so they may avoid the area until clean.
Decontaminate Surfaces	Any equipment or surfaces contaminated with blood or potentially infectious body fluids should be wiped immediately with paper towels or disposable clothes and disinfected. The area should be dry before reuse. Use gloves when coming into direct contact with blood or bodily fluids.
Decontaminate Textiles (if applicable)	Blood on fabrics, such as on a costume or knee pads, should be laundered in a hot water protocol at a temp of at least 160°F (71°C) for a 25-minute cycle.
Monitor Wounds	Dancers should care for the wound and keep it clean and covered with an occlusive dressing while dancing.

Basic hygiene and standard precautions are important in all dance settings. If there is an exposure, immediately wash the area with soap and water. Contact with a mucous membrane (like inside the eyes, nose, or mouth) or an open wound is more concerning than contact with intact skin. If there is significant concern, the dancer should be directed to the nearest emergency room, where a risk assessment can be performed. If the risk is high enough, prophylaxis medication may be considered to reduce the risk of infection.

References:

- McGrew C, MacCallum D, Narducci D, *et al.* AMSSM position statement update: blood-borne pathogens in the context of sports participation *Br J Sports Med* Published Online First: 19 March 2019.
- Evidence of HIV Treatment and Viral Suppression in Preventing the Sexual Transmission of HIV. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/risk/art/cdc-hiv-art-viral-suppression.pdf> Published December 2018.
- HIV Treatment Can Prevent Sexual Transmission. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/risk/art/cdc-hiv-tasp-101.pdf> Published November 2019.

Resources:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/livingwithhiv/index.html>
- <https://aidsinfo.nih.gov/>

Disclaimer: *The information presented here related to HIV is to help guide and inform the dancer and training staff, it is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional. This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.*

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