

Women and AIDS : plain speaking about AIDS and how it affects women, written for women by the experts - women. 4, Women, drugs and HIV / Positively Women and Immunity.

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Publication/Creation

1989.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bh2gvpvq>

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POSITIVELY WOMEN

A N D

immunity

Women

A N D

AIDS

*Plain speaking
about AIDS and
how it affects
women written for
women by the
experts – women*

**4. Women,
Drugs and HIV**

Rights as a drug user

Never feel pressurised into having an HIV test.

If you're arrested – and you're antibody positive to HIV – it's completely your choice whether you tell the police about your status. This has its pros and cons:

Positive people have been treated badly by the police – and if your arrest leads to remand or to a prison sentence, be prepared to be segregated or treated badly in other ways by the prison staff and your fellow inmates.

But if you're not well, which is very likely if you're withdrawing, and you have any of the conditions associated with HIV infection, maybe it's better to tell the police or prison officers about your HIV status. It may mean you get to see a doctor – and treated – sooner.

Don't say you've got HIV infection if you haven't – we've heard this can get you into more trouble.

If you're starting a prison sentence and you're not sure about your HIV status, it's your choice whether you have the test or not. No-one can force you to have the test – remember you've already got your sentence to cope with and getting a positive result without support can be devastating.

The HIV test

It's possible to test for HIV itself, but the usual test is for the antibody your immune system produces to fight the virus.

No-one knows how long after it takes for the antibody to appear after you become infected with HIV. We reckon it takes at least six months. So a positive antibody test result means you're probably infected.

A negative test result doesn't mean you're not infected – just that you haven't developed antibodies to the virus. Don't take chances.

Survival Guide

PLAY IT SAFE

We all know the only certain way of not getting infected with the virus is to always use our own works. We also know using drugs makes your lifestyle chaotic and in real life we don't always have a new set of works to use each time. If that's the case, follow these guidelines if you can:

- Clean your syringe and needle with either bleach or washing up liquid. Then rinse them with plenty of hot – or, better still, boiling – water.
- Always use your own spoon. Some people have been infected by blood left on the spoon.
- Always use your own filter. These, too, can have infected blood in them.
- If you're splitting your fix with someone, don't transfer it from one syringe to another – unless both syringes and needles are new. One of the needles or syringes may already be infected and you'll be running a risk even if the spoon's clean.

A lot of the stuff you hear about not sharing equipment is the right information – but it's not always realistic for a chaotic drug user.

When you're in a public toilet with someone else, desperately sick, with one set of works between you, you're going to share. If you can't follow the guidelines above, we suggest – but only as your last option – that you remove as much of the blood as possible from the syringe by flushing it out with water – hot, if you can get it. This isn't advised, but it may be better than nothing.

If you have to share, and if one of you knows you're positive, it makes sense for that person to go second.

If you're stoned – even though you've done well not sharing equipment – and you have penetrative sex, it defeats the object if man you have sex with doesn't wear a condom.

If you're a working woman, always use condoms. If a punter offers you more money for sex without a condom, turn him down – it's not worth it.

STAYING WELL

You know staying healthy while you're using drugs isn't the easiest – or the most important – thing in your life. But, if you have HIV infection, the truth is that the healthier you are the less risk you run of developing AIDS. Eating well doesn't have to be an expensive business. Rather than grabbing a packet of crisps or a bar of chocolate, buy a hamburger – which, at least, has some nutritional value.

We all know money for scoring is the most important thing, but when you have some extra cash treat your self to some fresh fruit and get some vitamins inside you. (Intravenous vitamin C is no substitute for the real thing).

If you're positive, your best bet is to stop using drugs completely. If you feel it's not possible now go to your local DDU, – or, your GP – and ask for a script. You're more likely to get methadone linctus than injectables.

If you decide to stop and you've got HIV infection please ring Positively Women, and we'll tell you the best ways to detox.

Stress is harmful to your health – especially if you're positive. Using drugs can be a very stressful existence. But, when you can, try to cut it by taking it easy when you're stoned.

If you do stop using, and you find it hard to fill your time, ring us because we've got plenty of suggestions. Some of us have been through this, too.

GENERAL ADVICE

If you've got HIV infection, you know you've got to take extra care of your health. As we've said, stress is a great factor in bringing on illness. Do your utmost to cut it out.

There is nothing more stressful than being homeless or living in bad housing. If you are, contact Positively Women – the phone number's in this leaflet's listings. We'll probably be able to help you.

Sort out your Social Security benefits. Even if the DSS is paying you now, you may be entitled to more than you're getting. At Positively Women we'll probably be able to help – and we know it's always nice to have some money coming in every week – and there'll be at least one day when you don't have to worry about money.

CLAIM WHAT'S YOURS

If you've got HIV infection or AIDS or a condition associated with them, claim what you're entitled to from the DSS. You'll need a medical certificate signed by your doctor, saying you can't work. When that certificate runs out you must get a new one and send it to the DSS.

If you've paid enough contributions, you'll qualify for Sickness Benefit. If you haven't paid enough, you'll get Income Support. With both of these you get 100 percent of your rent paid. If you own your home you may get half of your mortgage interest for four months. After that, you get the lot – but only the interest.

After about six months, people who get Sickness Benefit are automatically transferred to Invalidity Benefit – which pays a bit more, but they lose some of their Housing Benefit.

People who get Income Support can claim extra benefit after about six months. Ask the DSS for a leaflet on Disability Premium and Severe Disability Premium. If you satisfy all the conditions set by the DSS, you can get both.

If you need someone to look after you fairly intensively during the day or night or both day and night, you may qualify for Attendance Allowance – the conditions laid down are pretty strict. But if you don't find out about the benefit and claim it, you won't get it. Get advice before you claim, though, to improve your chances of succeeding.

If you can't walk or you virtually can't walk or walking is dangerous for your health, you may qualify for Mobility Allowance. It's another tough one to claim, so it's best not to try without getting advice from a skilled benefits adviser before you fill in the form.

Invalid Care Allowance is paid to people who are of working age but who can't work because they spend 35 hours or more a week looking after someone who is severely disabled. This benefit is taxed – but even if you don't get paid anything, claiming it could mean you get free contributions towards your state pension. Get advice before you claim.

For quality professional benefits advice, if you live in London, phone Immunity on 01-968 8909. If you live outside London contact your nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau – the number's in your phone book.

Clean equipment in central London

The Caravan Needle Exchange, South Wharf Road, London W2. (Tube: Paddington). Phone: 01-725 1418
Cleveland Street Needle Exchange, 60a Cleveland Street, W1. (Tube: Goodge Street) Phone: 01-631 1750
Hungerford Drug Project Needle Exchange, Second Floor, 26 Craven Street, WC2. (Tube: Embankment or Charing Cross). Phone: 01-930 4688

For information about other needle exchanges phone SCODA on 01-430 2341. Ask for the information officer.

Legal advice

Release, 169 Commercial Street, London E1. Phone: 01-377 5905 or 01-603 8654 (24 emergencies only) – for drugs related problems.
Immunity's Legal Centre, 260A Kilburn Lane, London W10 4BA. Phone: 01-968 8909 – for HIV and AIDS related problems.

Central London DDUs

St Mary's Hospital, 16 South Wharf Road, London W2. (Tube: Paddington) Phone: 01-725 6485 or 6486.
Charing Cross Hospital, 57 Aspenlea Road, London W6. (Tube: Hammersmith) Phone: 01-846 1538.
St Clements, 2a Bow Road, London E3. (Tube: Mile End or Bow Road) Phone: 01-377 7975 – or 01-377 7951 for HIV Counsellor).
St Mary Abbots, Marloes Road, London W8. (Tube: Kensington High Street) Phone: 01-846 6117.
University College Hospital, National Temperance Hospital, 122 Hampstead Road, London NW1 Phone: 01-387 9541, 9542 or 9543.

Dental treatment

Some dentists won't treat you if you have HIV infection, but the ones we've listed here will
Kensington and Chelsea Family Practitioner Committee Dental Clinic, 40 Alderney Street, SW1. Phone: 01-630 8436.
Clinic 5, University College Dental Hospital, Capper Street, London WC1.

Residential Service

City Roads (Crisis intervention), 356-358 City Road, London EC1. Phone 278 8671 or 8672.

GROUPS AND SERVICES

Afro Caribbean Helpline Service: Phone – free of charge – for specialised service and support on HIV and AIDS and full list of drug agencies from National AIDS Helpline's black advisers. Phone: 0800 567 123 *Fr 6pm – 10pm. Calls free*

Body Positive: Mutual help and support group. Drop-in centre at 51b Philbeach Gardens, London SW5. Write: PO Box 493, London W14 0TF **Helpline: 01 – 373 9124 Daily 7pm – 10pm**

Childline: Confidential counselling for children and young adults in trouble or danger. Write: Freepost 1111, London EC4B 4BB – no stamp needed. Phone: 0800 1111 – calls free. *24 hrs*

CLASH (Central London Action on Street Health): Young people's advice and support on anything to do with health. Write: c/o Soho Hospital, Soho Square, London W1. Phone: 01 – 734 1794 *Mo-Fr, 10am – 5pm. Other times answering machine*

DAWN (Drugs, Alcohol, Women Nationally): Advice, info and help for women with any problems caused by alcohol or drugs. Write: 39–41 North Road, London N7 9DP. Phone: 01 – 700 4653 *Mo-Fr, 10am – 4pm. Answering machine at other times*

Dentists who treat people who have HIV infection: NHS Special Needs Dental Clinic, Alderney Street, London SW1. Phone: 01 – 630 8436 *Mon, 3pm – 5pm, Tu, Wed, 9am – noon* or: advice on who to see from Mrs Satchell at City and Hackney Health Authority. Phone: 01 – 253 3020

Frontliners: Mutual help and support group for people who have AIDS. Write: c/o Terrence Higgins Trust, BM AIDS, London WC1N 3XX. Phone: 01 – 831 0330

Immunity: HIV research and health education charity with full-time specialist legal centre for anyone with a legal or benefits problem connected with HIV infection, AIDS or an associated condition. Free legal advice and court representation on offer. Also welfare rights advice. Phone to make an appointment. Charity and legal centre at 260A Kilburn Lane, London W10 4BA. Phone 01 – 968 8909. *Mo-Fr 10am – 5pm*

The Landmark: Day centre for people who have HIV infection and people who have AIDS. Will offer, advice, recreational facilities, meals. Plus info for other people. 47 Tulse Hill, London SW2. Phone: 01 – 671 7611/2

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard: The original helpline Not an AIDS specialist but helpful. Write: BM Switchboard, London WC1N 3XX. Phone: 01 – 837 7324. *24hrs*

London Lesbian Line: Information, support and advice for women. Phone: 01 – 251 6911 *Mo, Fr 2pm – 10pm; Tu, Th 7pm – 10pm*

London Lighthouse: Hospice and drop-in centre. Offers counselling, health advice, support at home, breaks for carers and terminal care. Write: 111 – 117 Lancaster Road, London W11 1QT. Phone: 01 – 792 1200

Mainliners: Group for ex-drug users – and drug users who get their supplies on

prescription – who have HIV infection or have AIDS or a related condition Write: PO Box 125, London SW9 8EF. Helpline: 01 – 738 7333. *Mo-Fr 10am – 5pm*

Mildmay Mission: Christian-run hospice for people who have AIDS. Write: Hackney Road, London E2 7NA. Phone: 01 – 739 2331

National AIDS Helplines: Phone – free of charge – 0800 555 777 (for free leaflets or 0800 567 123 (for confidential advice and full list of drug agencies) *24 hours a day*

Positively Healthy: Self-help group encourages positive approach to coping with HIV infection and AIDS. Runs life-affirming support groups and open meetings for people with HIV antibodies or AIDS. Publishes monthly magazine (send 34p SAE). Write: PO Box 71, Richmond TW9 3DJ. Phone: 01 – 940 5355

Positively Women: UK's sole women-only support group – meetings open only to women with positive diagnosis – and counselling (face-to-face and on the phone), advice and information. Write: 333 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8PX. Phone: 01 – 837 9705 *Mo-Fr 10am – 5pm. Support group meets fortnightly. Th 6.30pm – 8.30pm*

Positive Partners: Self-help support for anyone affected by HIV. Write: c/o 10 Rathbone Place, London W1. Phone: 01 – 249 6068

Præd Street Project: Research project also offers free STD and general women's health medical and information service for prostitutes. Contact: c/o Præd Street Clinic, St Marys Hospital, London W2 1NY. Phone: 01 – 725 1549/6486 *Mo-Fr, 9am – 5pm. Open afternoon We 1pm – 5pm. Visits by appointment Tu, 10am – 5pm, We, 1pm – 5pm*

Rape Crisis Centre: Physical protection and emotional support. Write: PO Box 69, London WC1. Phone: 01 – 837 1600. *24hrs*

Release: Advice and information on drug-related problems – including legal problems. Write: 169 Commercial Street, London E1 6BW. Phone 01 – 377 5905 *Mo-Fr, 10am – 6pm or (emergencies) 01 – 603 8654 24hrs*

SCODA (Standing Conference on Drug Abuse): Information officer keeps up-to-date list of needle exchange schemes. Write: 1–4 Hatton Place, London EC1. Phone: 01 – 430 2341/3

Terrence Higgins Trust: Information and counselling about HIV infection and AIDS plus support groups and trained volunteers to help people with HIV infection and people who have AIDS. Write: BM AIDS, London WC1N 3XX. Phone: 01 – 831 0330 (Admin only) Helpline: 01 – 242 1010 *Daily, 3pm – 10pm*

Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre: Not an AIDS specialist – helpful. Advice on all health issues affecting women, including HIV infection and AIDS. Write: 52–54 Featherstone Street, London WC1. Phone: 01 – 251 6580 or 6332 *Mo, We, Fr, 11am – 5pm*

POSITIVELY WOMEN

Is an organisation run by women for women with HIV infection, AIDS – or any of the conditions associated with it. We offer the following services: support group, open only to women who have HIV infection, AIDS, or an associated condition, telephone and one-to-one counselling and consultancy services. Write to us at 333 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8PX or phone us on 01-837 9705

WHAT'S AIDS?

AIDS is short for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. If you have AIDS your body's defence system is severely weakened. That leaves the body vulnerable to serious infections, which can kill you. That condition is called AIDS. It develops in you. HIV is often blamed for causing AIDS.

SO WHAT'S HIV?

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. The virus was discovered in 1983. Since then it's been called LAV and HTLV-III, but since 1986 its proper name has been HIV. It may cause AIDS to develop in you. To get infected you have to let someone's body fluids – blood, semen, vaginal fluids and, possibly, breast milk – get into your blood stream. There are no known cases of infection through tears and saliva. HIV isn't like most viruses because, when you're infected it lives inside blood cells which are part of your body's defence system. As the cells divide and multiply, so does the virus.

HOW DOES IT SPREAD?

It is very difficult to get infected with HIV. You can put yourself of risk of getting infected:

- By having sex with someone who has HIV infection. You can cut the risk of infection by making sure he wears a condom – and remember, the more partners you have penetrative sex with, the greater you risk of coming into contact with the virus. Anal penetration is far riskier than vaginal penetrative sex.
- By sharing needles or syringes with someone who's infected with the virus.
- By sharing sex toys, whether you're straight or lesbian.

The virus can't be transmitted by social contact – by kissing, cuddling, shaking hands, sharing cups, towels, using toilets or by any close contact that doesn't involve the exchange of body fluids.

immunity

260A KILBURN LANE, LONDON W10 4BA TELEPHONE 01-968 8909