

Women & HIV : prevention : plain speaking about HIV and how it affects women / Immunity.

Contributors

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women &

HIV

Prevention

Plain speaking about HIV
and how it affects women

immunity

General Advice

You can get general information about HIV and AIDS from the National AIDS Helplines on 0800 -567 123. The service is open 24 hours a day and your call will be free. Or, for more specialised advice and help contact the organisations listed in this leaflet.

Survival guide

It's not who you are that puts you at risk of getting infected with HIV — it's what you do.

Any woman who uses drugs and shares injecting equipment or has risky sex with someone who's HIV positive can get infected. And, if she's in a lasting relationship, her partner may get infected, too.

That's why all women owe it to themselves — and to others — to know about protecting themselves from getting infected with HIV.

The only way of staying safe is to make sure that no-one's blood, semen or vaginal fluids gets into contact with your bloodstream.

So the safest sex is no sexual intercourse. Maybe that doesn't sound too attractive. So, if you're going to have sex, stick to safer sex:

- use a condom when you're having sexual intercourse, whether it's vaginal or anal.
- use lots of water-based lubricant jelly to cut down the wear on the rubber of the condom. Use a flavoured condom when you have oral sex with a man.
- don't use enemas or douches before you have sex, they can cut you inside and increase the risk you run.

Remember there are alternatives to sexual intercourse. They're safe and can be fun. Try:

- penis to body contact - but not between the buttocks or thighs
- penis to breast contact
- talking dirty
- mutual masturbation .

Many men are worried about AIDS, too. Safer sex can be fun for both of you.

All about condoms

Protect yourself by making sure that any man you're having sex with wears a condom. Remember it's not just for contraception, it's also to protect you from HIV.

Other forms of contraception won't do — the pill won't protect you. Nor will a coil. If the man's had a vasectomy it doesn't stop him having HIV in his semen.

And you can't rely on a diaphragm. Always use lots of lubricant when you have sexual intercourse, vaginal or anal — it cuts down the wear and tear on the condom and makes sure it stays in one piece inside you.

Never use a petroleum jelly, like Vaseline, because that can rot the condom and make it burst inside you.

Buy the condoms yourself to be sure. Pick a brand that's labelled as strong. Look for the British Standards 'kitemark' on the pack. It shows they've been made to that standard.

There's a spermicide called nonoxynol. It's in the lubricant on many condoms. Tests in laboratories show it can kill HIV in the test

tube. So try condoms with nonoxynol in the lubricant.

If it makes you sore, stop using them and use another brand.

Lubricants and spermicides make regular condoms taste disgusting, so use flavoured condoms for oral sex.

- check the expiry date on the condoms' pack. If they're out of date, chuck it away.
- if the condom's sachet is already torn, throw away the condom. Exposure to air can rot the rubber and make it burst inside you.
- make sure the man puts the condom on properly. Better still, roll it onto his penis yourself. That way you will be sure.
- use a water-based lubricant gel, like KY jelly.
- nonoxynol spermicide is also in some lubricants. If it doesn't make you sore, try using it.

Drugs

If you inject drugs, stay safe from HIV by always using new equipment - or equipment that only you have used before.

- always use your own spoon to cook up — or one no-one's used before you.
- always use your own filter — there could be someone else's blood in one that's already been used.
- always use clean water — if someone else has used it, there could be blood there, too. If you're splitting a fix with someone else, don't transfer it from one syringe to

another, unless both syringes and both needles are new.

But it's not always that easy. We don't always have our works or a new set with us when someone offers us a fix.

If it happens to you, don't use equipment someone else has used, unless you:

- fill the syringe and needle with thin household bleach. Then flush it out.
- fill them with cold water straight from the tap. Then flush it out again.
- check there's no trace of blood.
- go back to the beginning and repeat every step in the process.

Sex with another woman

No-one's immune to HIV, whether they're male or female, gay or straight.

So lesbian sex could put you at risk, too, unless you:

- use your own sex toys — like vibrators — or wash them well before you swap them over, if you're sharing.
- avoid oral sex when your partner's having her period.
- cover any cuts and sores on your fingers.
- remember anything that may cause bleeding — like fisting or bombing — puts you at risk, if your partner's HIV positive.
- remember some lesbian women inject drugs, too.
- remember some lesbian women have had sex with men - and that some still do.

Taking the test

When you catch 'flu or a cold, your body produces antibodies to those infections.

It's part of your body's defence system and it's the first stage of your getting better.

If you get infected with HIV, your body produces antibodies to it, but your defences can't kill this virus, because it's moved into some of your blood cells.

The usual test for HIV is a blood test which looks for the antibodies to HIV.

If you've got them, you're HIV positive. It's the test some people call the "AIDS test".

But no-one knows how many people who are HIV positive will develop AIDS. In fact there's no test which will show whether you will ever develop AIDS if you're HIV positive.

If you want to have an HIV test, make sure you get good counselling before the test is done - and before you get the result.

The test will be free if you have it done at an NHS genitourinary clinic - sometimes they're called 'GU', 'STD' or 'special' clinics.

A positive HIV test result could have a serious impact on your life. So, before you have the test done, think very carefully about what you're doing. That's why getting counselling before the test is so important.

There's no cure yet for being infected with HIV, but there are treatments which can slow down the virus's spread inside you.

You can help by changing the way you live. Unless you decide you might as well improve your lifestyle now anyway.

LONDON AND NATIONAL GROUPS AND SERVICES

ACET: Christian group offers home care, grants etc across the UK. London office: ☐ PO Box 1323 ☎ 081-840 7879

ACT-UP: Direct action on HIV & rights. ☐ BM Box 2995, London WC1N 3XX ☎ 071-490 5749

Afro Caribbean Helpline: Specialist advice and support. Fr, 6pm-10pm ☎ (free) 0800-567 123

AIDS & Housing Project: ☐ 16-18 Strutton Ground, London SW1P 2HP

Asian AIDS Helpline: Advice in Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi, English. We, 6pm-10pm. ☎ (free) 0800 282 445

BHAN (Black HIV and AIDS Network): Advice, support for HIV positive African, African Caribbean, Asian. ☐ 111 Devonport Rd, London W12 8PB. ☎ 081-745 9223 (helpline) or 081-749 2828 (admin)

Body Positive: Self-help, support. For BP groups around the UK, call National AIDS Helpline (☎ 0800-567 123) or write to **BP London Centre** ☐ 51b Philbeach Gardens, London SW5 for meals, massage, etc. Mo & Fr, 11am-9pm; Tu-Th, 11am-5pm. **Body Positive Helpline:** ☎ 071-373 9124. Daily 7pm-10pm **Body Positive Support Group:** For newly diagnosed & anxious HIV positive people, lovers, close friends, etc. Su, 12.15pm, ☐ London Lesbian and Gay Centre, 69 Cowcross St, London EC1

Cantonese AIDS Helpline: Advice in Cantonese. Tu 6pm-10pm. ☎ (free) 0800 - 282 445

CARA (Care And Resources for people affected by AIDS/HIV): Support from Christians. ☐ 178 Lancaster Rd, London W11 1QU. & 071-792 8299

Immunity: Free specialist legal advice, help for HIV positive people. Appointment needed. ☐ 260A Kilburn Lane, London W10 4BA. ☎ 081-968 8909. Mo-Fr: 10am-5pm

The Landmark: Day centre for HIV positive people. Meals, recreation, advice. ☐ 47a Tulse Hill, London SW2. ☎ 081-671 7611/2. Mo, Th, 10am-9pm; Tu, Fr, 10am-5pm; We, 10am-7pm

Lesbian Employment Rights: Rights at work experts. ☐ St Margaret's House, 21 Old Ford Rd, London E2 9PL ☎ 081-983 0694 Mo-Th 7pm-10pm

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard: Helpful. ☎ 071-734 7324 (24 hrs)

London Lesbian Line: Information, support, advice. ☎ 071-251 6911. Tu & Th, 7pm-10pm

London Lighthouse: Residential care & day centre. Counselling, health advice, home support, terminal care, advice

sessions. ☐ 111 Lancaster Road, London W11 1QT. ☎ 071-792 1200

Margaret Pyke Centre: Gynaecology research centre. Free clinic — free contraceptives. Appointment needed. ☐ 15 Batemans Buildings, Soho Square, London W1. ☎ 071-734 9351

Mildmay Mission Hospital: Convalescence, respite, terminal, day care. 24 hour home care service. Mother & baby rooms. Frontline drop-in office. ☐ Hackney Rd, London E2 7NA. ☎ 071-739 2331

National AIDS Helplines: ☎ (free) 0800-567 123 (for information & advice) or 0800-555 777 (for leaflets) 24 hrs, both lines

Positively Children: For under-18s who are HIV positive — or who have HIV positive parents or guardians ☐ & ☎ as Positive Partners below.

Positively Women: Advice, support for & from HIV positive women. ☐ 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE. ☎ 071-490 5515

Positive Partners: Self help, support for people who are HIV positive & their partners etc. Advice & some cash help. ☐ 305 Panther House, 38 Mount Pleasant, London WC1X 0AP ☎ 071-278 2232

Positive Youth: Meetings & socialising for HIV positive men & women. ☐ Body Positive Centre, 51b Philbeach Gardens, London SW5 9EB ☎ 071-373 7547

Praed Street Project: Free health care for women who are paid for sex. Resident doctor. ☐ Mint Wing Cottage, St Mary's Hospital, London W2 1NY. ☎ 071-725 1549

PACE (Project for Advice, Care and Education): Counselling and counselling training. ☐ London Lesbian and Gay Centre, 69 Cowcross Street, London EC1. ☎ 071-251 2689

SHARE (Shakti HIV/AIDS Response): Support, information, advice in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Singhalese, Tamil, Urdu. ☐ Share, BM Box 3167, London WC1X 3NN

South East Asian HIV/AIDS Support Group: Meets 3rd We of each month at London Lighthouse. ☎ Hong Tan on 071-485 6756

Terrence Higgins Trust: HIV and AIDS information, counselling. Support groups. ☐ 52 Grays Inn Road, London WC1N 8JU. ☎ 071-831 0330 (admin); ☎ 071-242 1010 (helpline, daily 3pm-10pm)

Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre: Women's health issues advice. ☐ 52 Featherstone Street, London WC1Y 8RT. Mo, We, Fr, 11am-5pm

KEY TO SYMBOLS: ☐ = ADDRESS ☎ = PHONE

What's HIV?

HIV is short for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. If you get infected with it, HIV may help AIDS develop in you. HIV isn't like most viruses because, when you're infected, the virus lives inside blood cells which make up part of your body's immune system.

How does it spread?

It's difficult to get infected with HIV. Your bloodstream has to come into contact with someone else's blood, semen, vaginal fluids and, possibly, breast milk. You're at risk if you:

- have sex with someone who's HIV positive. Cut that risk by making sure any man you have penetrative sex with wears a condom. The more partners you have, the greater the risk of getting infected. Anal sex is far riskier than vaginal intercourse.
- inject drugs with equipment already used by someone who's infected with HIV.
- share sex toys, whether you're straight or lesbian.

What's AIDS?

AIDS stands for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. If you have AIDS, your body's defence system is severely weakened leaving you vulnerable to serious infections. Some could kill you.

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