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# POSITIVELY WOMEN

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



## POSITIVE RESULT?



### Positive result

Whoever we are an HIV positive test result is a shock. It is important to remember three major points:

- **A positive result doesn't mean you'll develop AIDS.**
- **An AIDS diagnosis doesn't necessarily mean you'll be sick all the time.**
- **You're not alone – many women are living positively with HIV and AIDS.**

For many women who are HIV+ or who have AIDS, it is very useful to talk to others in the same situation.

Positively Women was set up by women who have HIV disease to offer support to women in the same position. Our telephone number is 071 490 5515 (10am to 4.30pm weekdays) so if you would like to talk to someone on the telephone, meet another woman on a one to one basis or within a group please contact us – we are here to offer support.

### Look after yourself – A strategy for staying healthy

It is vital to work on your strategy for staying well, and we mean **work**. In the past you may have taken chances with your health. Studies have shown that the immune system is affected by every part of ourselves and our lives – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. As the 'bad' factors add up, the immune system has to work harder just to stay as it is. No one knows exactly what is the best way to cope with a disease but it is generally agreed that everything we do to lighten the load on the immune system may help us stay healthier.

These things are 'bad' for the immune system:

- **Stress**
- **Poor diet**
- **Lack of sleep**
- **Overwork**
- **No fun or relaxation**
- **Lack of exercise**
- **Negative, depressive mental attitudes**
- **Drugs and alcohol use, including smoking**

### Eat well

The body needs a daily intake of different foods to meet the demands for warmth and energy, preventing sickness and fighting infection. The body needs carbohydrates, proteins, fats and oils, minerals, vitamins, fibre and water. It's important to have a balance, with plenty of natural and raw, unprocessed foods for maximum nutrition and minimum chemical additives. You may feel confused by conflicting advice about diets, but try to find what feels good for you and your particular way of life, remembering that no two people think and eat in exactly the same way.



If you choose a particular diet or vitamin regime try to keep the enjoyment ingredient in it. Avoid adding to your stress load by worrying about every mouthful. After all, if eating is one of your small daily pleasures, that's a bonus.

**Consider a daily intake of these basic ingredients:**

**Fresh fruit and vegetables:** These contain the highest concentration of essential vitamins. The more we eat raw the more benefit we get. There's an enormous variety to make meals interesting so if you've never experimented with fun combinations, now may be the time to start.

**Protein:** Is vital for repair and growth of all cells, especially during illness. It comes from soyabeans, lentils, beans of all types, grains like brown rice, buckwheat; seeds and nuts; fresh fish, chicken, meat, eggs, cheese, yoghurt and peanut butter.

**Carbohydrate:** This comes from whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, wholemeal breads and wholemeal pasta.

**Cereals and grains:** Wholegrain breakfast cereals and unprocessed oats, rice, bran, wheatgerm, sesame seeds and nuts are excellent sources of nutrition.

**Drink:** Water and fruit juices without sugar additives. Most UK tap water is safe to drink, though you may choose to boil tap water and cool before drinking or drink mineral water, preferably carbonated.

**Vitamins:** To keep the immune system healthy we need vitamins A, B5, B6, Folic Acid, C, E and Zinc.

**Vitamin A** helps fight and increase resistance to infection. It is found in carrots, green leafy vegetables, yellow fruit and vegetables, eggs, milk and fish liver oil. If you are pregnant consult your doctor before taking Vitamin A supplements.

**Vitamin B** complex is needed for optimum immune response. It is found in brewer's yeast, whole grain cereals, brown rice, wheatgerm and green vegetables.

**Vitamin C** enhances the immune system and helps to produce antibodies. It is found in citrus fruit, most fresh fruit and vegetables, especially kiwifruit, peppers, strawberries and pawpaw.

**Vitamin E** is essential to the immune system. It promotes T-helper cell activity and stimulates antibody response. It is found in whole seeds and nuts, soyabeans, wheatgerm, eggs, butter, dark green vegetables.

**Zinc** improves the immune system and is necessary for normal T cell function. It is found in brewer's yeast, mushrooms, egg-yolk, nuts, seafood, split peas and sunflower seeds.



### **Some do's and don'ts**

When you cook your food, grill or steam it. These are the best ways of keeping the good properties in your food.

Never overcook vegetables as this kills off all the nutritional properties.

Salmonella is found in some eggs and chickens so make sure they're well cooked.

It is preferable to use organic foods but they can be expensive. We suggest you make sure all the food you eat is well washed to remove bacteria and traces of chemicals.

Some people are allergic to dairy products. That needn't be a problem as there are a lot of substitutes on the market these days.

A balanced diet should provide you with the necessary vitamins and minerals you require. However, if you decide to take vitamin and mineral supplements consult your doctor and then shop around carefully as prices differ widely. Make sure you take a brand which contains no artificial buffers. Some multi-vitamins may be a waste of money.

A vegetarian diet is one way to achieve a healthy diet but ONLY if it is balanced. Ask your doctor for advice or call Positively Women.

### **Steer clear of stress**

The real question is not so much how to avoid stress, but how to reduce or manage it well. The answer, like the reaction to stress, is different for all of us.

The first step is wanting to do something about the stresses that bother you. Then believing you can. Simply choosing to do something positive will start making you feel more in control. Give yourself time. Learning to handle stress is not easy; it does not come overnight. Identify situations which provoke anxiety. If you can, avoid them. If they are a constant part of your life, try to work out ways to face them and reduce the fears. For example, you may find a counsellor helpful.

Find a relaxation technique that works for you, and stick with it. Remember, this may take time – when we're all wound up we can't expect to unwind in a week. Relaxation techniques include deep breathing, relaxation medication, relaxation exercises, swimming, massage, music, yoga, T'ai chi etc. Some of these techniques can be done on your own, e.g. deep breathing or swimming, and the other techniques, amongst others, are available at centres (such as the Landmark – see listings) for people with HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, for those people not living in the area, most of these centres are in London.



### **Get plenty of sleep**

Tiredness is one of the most common problems we share. Of course the amount of sleep we need varies tremendously, but we recommend you try to give yourself at least eight hours sleep a night to give your body a chance to recharge its batteries.

If you have difficulty sleeping, it really is worth trying out the simple, practical things that can be done to help yourself drift off – a warm bath, hot milk drink, herb teas, relaxing music or reading before bed.

If your worrying keeps you awake, try to make time in the day to talk with friends or a counsellor about your concerns. By yourself, at night, things can seem twice as big and twice as scary.

### **Exercise**

Regular exercise does a lot of good things for our bodies – improves circulation, oxygenates the blood and removes toxins through sweat. If you've never been interested in exercise you probably won't want to take up anything strenuous; start gently and build up as you gather strength. There is no point in doing something you loathe but do try to find some exercise that gives you pleasure. The most important thing is to find something that suits you. Make it fun.

### **Say 'When'**

Drugs do damage to your immune system. If you can stop smoking and cut back on alcohol it may help. Stimulants like speed, cocaine, poppers are definitely harmful. Remember – all things in moderation!

### **Medical care**

There's no point in just thinking about staying healthy – take steps to make sure you do.

Make sure you have a good, honest relationship with your doctor. Never be afraid to ask questions. If you're not satisfied that you've been fully informed on all aspects of your state of health, change your doctor to one you're comfortable with. Don't be a passive patient. It's your health and your right to know.

Once you've had a positive HIV antibody test result you may be more vulnerable to gynaecological infections, like the wart virus which can lead to cervical cancer. We strongly recommend that you have regular smear tests, ideally once every six months, as there is evidence that positive women are very prone to re-occurring gynaecological infections. If this is not possible have a smear test whenever you are offered one. Many doctors also recommend a yearly colposcopy.



### Periods

Many women when diagnosed feel anxious about their periods. In fact, there is really no more to worry about than usual. However, there is an increased risk of transmission if you have oral sex during a menstrual period, especially if your partner has cuts or sores in their mouth, bleeding gums, ulcers, etc.

When disposing of tampons, no extra precautions are needed, do so in the usual way by flushing down the toilet and make sure you double wrap sanitary towels before disposing of them.

### Dental care

It's very important to have good dental care. If you are HIV positive or have AIDS, oral infections can become a problem. Ask at your clinic to put you in touch with a sympathetic dentist in your area.

### Travel

Try to take at least one holiday a year. If you're travelling abroad to a country which requires vaccinations do not have any live vaccines – discuss this with your doctor.

Avoid taking too much sun – even if you want a tan. The sun can be very bad for you, for example it can activate herpes.

Before you decide to travel to another country, check what its policy is towards HIV infection and AIDS. If you fell ill in a country which is hostile towards HIV and AIDS, you could find yourself in trouble and, quite frankly, you can do without that sort of stress.

For more information contact Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad on 071 631 4408.

Positively Women has produced a series of leaflets covering a range of issues and concerns around 'Women and AIDS'.

1. Prevention
2. Positive Result? Look after yourself.
3. HIV, Pregnancy and Children
4. Women, Drugs and HIV
5. African Women's Health Issues

Copies of these leaflets can be obtained from Positively Women at 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE.  
Telephone 071 490 5501.



## Groups and services

**Black HIV and AIDS Network:**  
Phone 081 693 6000.

**Blackliners:** PO Box 74, London SW12 9JY. Helpline: 071 738 5274.

**Body Positive:** For addresses and phone numbers of BP groups phone the National AIDS Helpline (0800 567 123) or contact Body Positive, London. Helpline: 071 373 9124 daily, 7-10pm.

**Body Positive Women's Core Group:** National. Meets monthly at Body Positive Centre to provide mutual support and plan women's response to HIV infection and AIDS. For info and membership details write: 51b Philbeach Gardens, London SW5 9EB. Phone: 071 835 1045.

**British Pregnancy Advisory Service:** Write: 7 Belgrave Road, London SW1. Phone: 071 222 0985.

**Frontliners:** Mutual help and support group for people who have AIDS. Phone: 071 430 1199.

**Haemophilia Society:** Phone: 071 928 2020.

**Immunity's Legal Centre:** Free full-time specialist legal centre for people with HIV living in Greater London. Phone: 081 968 8909.

**The Landmark:** Day centre for people who have HIV infection and people who have AIDS. Offers meals, recreational facilities – Mo and Th 10am-9pm, Tu and Fr 10am-5pm, We 10am-7pm. Women-only evening We 7-9pm. Advice sessions including legal advice from Immunity's Legal Centre We 5-7pm. Plus info for other people. Write or drop in: 47 Tulse Hill, London SW2. Phone: 081 671 7611.

**London Lesbian Line:** Information, support and advice for women. Phone: 071 251 6911 Tu-Th 7-10pm.

**London Lighthouse:** Residential care and drop-in centre. Offers counselling, health advice, support at home, breaks for carers, terminal care and advice sessions – including legal advice from Immunity's Legal Centre and North Kensington Law Centre. Th 5-7pm. Write: 111 Lancaster Road, London W11 1QT. Phone: 071 792 1200.

**Mainliners:** An organisation in the drugs and HIV field that promotes self help and provides services. PO Box 125, London SW9 8EF. Phone: 071 274 4000 ext 443.

**Mildmay Mission Hospital:** Convalescence, respite and terminal care. Plus day care and 24-hour call-out home care service, covering City and East London. Has mother and baby rooms. Frontliners drop-in office. Write: Hackney Road, London E2 7NA. Phone: 071 729 2331.

**National AIDS Helpline:** Phone: – free of charge – for confidential advice: 0800 567 123 24 hours.

**Positively Women:** Advice and support for and from women who have HIV infection, AIDS or a condition connected with HIV infection and AIDS. Write: 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE. Telephone: 071 490 5515 (client services); 071 490 5501 (administration).

**Positive Partners:** Self-help support for anyone affected by HIV. Write: c/o 10 Rathbone Place, London W1P 1DE. Phone: 071 249 6068.

**Release:** Advice and information on drug-related problems – including legal problems. Write: 169 Commercial Street, London E1 6BW. Phone: 071 377 5905 Mo-Fr 10am-6pm or 071 603 8654 (24 hours).

**Rape Crisis Centre:** Physical protection and emotional support. Write: PO Box 69, London WC1. Phone: 071 837 1600 24 hours.

**Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA):** Information officer keeps up-to-date list of syringe exchanges and drug projects. Write: 1-4 Hatton Place, London EC1N 8ND. Phone: 071 430 2341.

**Terrence Higgins Trust:** Information about and counselling over HIV infection and AIDS. Plus support groups and trained volunteers to help people who have HIV infection and people who have AIDS. Write: 52-54 Grays Inn Road, London WC1N 8JU. Phone: 071 831 0330 (admin only). Helpline: 071 242 1010 daily 3-10pm.

**Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre:** Not an AIDS specialist – but helpful. Advice on all health issues affecting women, including HIV infection and AIDS. Write: 52 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT. Mo, We, Fr 11am-5pm. Phone: 071 251 6580/6332.



### **What is HIV?**

HIV stands for 'Human Immunodeficiency Virus'. HIV is believed to be the virus which causes AIDS by slowly destroying the body's immune system.

A positive HIV antibody test means that at some time you have had contact with the virus and your body has produced antibodies in response to the infection. It is these antibodies that have been found in your body if you have a positive result. Antibodies are produced by the body to help fight infection. The HIV antibodies, however, do not kill the virus. A positive HIV antibody test cannot predict whether or not you will go on to develop AIDS.

### **So what is AIDS?**

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

Some people have HIV infection for years, without developing AIDS. Some develop illnesses less serious than AIDS. There is no way of knowing from your antibody test when, or if, you will develop AIDS.

### **How does it spread?**

It is very difficult to become infected with HIV unless you put yourself at risk:

- **By having unprotected penetrative sex, vaginal or anal, with someone who has HIV infection.**
- **By sharing needles or syringes with someone who's infected with the virus.**
- **From mother to baby – during pregnancy and childbirth.**
- **From blood transfusions. In Britain blood is screened but this is not always the case abroad.**
- **By using semen from a man who is HIV+ for donor insemination. In Britain screening is done in all insemination clinics so the risk lies in making personal arrangements if using semen from a donor who has not been tested.**

**The virus can't be spread 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.**

### **Positively Women**

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 groups, 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 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE or phone us on 071 490 5515 (client services) 071 490 5501 (administration).