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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 are HIV+ to offer support to women in the same position. Our telephone number is 071 490 5515 (10am to 4pm Mon, Wed, Thurs & Fri; 10am to 2pm Tues) so if you would like to talk to someone on the telephone, meet other women either on a one to one basis or within a group please contact us – we are here to offer support.

**Our helpline number is 071 490 2327  
(12am to 2pm weekdays)**

## **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 the virus but it is generally agreed that everything we do to lighten the load on the immune system will 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 attitudes**
- **Drug 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, who may be willing to write you a prescription. Otherwise shop around carefully as prices differ widely. Make sure you take a brand which contains no artificial buffers, as 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're 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.



## Positively Women

An organisation run by women for women with HIV and AIDS. We offer the following services: support groups, open only to women who have HIV and AIDS, 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).

Positively Women produces other leaflets in the series 'Women and AIDS', the titles of which are: 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.

## Groups and services

### **Black HIV and AIDS Network:**

Phone: 081 749 2828; Helpline: 081 742 9223.

**Blackliners:** Phone: 071 738 7468; Helpline: 071 738 5274.

### **Body Positive/Women's Core Group:**

For addresses and phone numbers of BP groups phone or contact Body Positive office: 071 835 1045; Helpline: 071 373 9124 daily, 7-10pm.

### **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.

**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. Phone: 071 792 1200.

**Mainliners:** An organisation in the drugs and HIV field that promotes self help and provides services. Phone: 071 738 4656 (client services) or 071 737 3141 (advice).

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

**Positive Partners:** Self-help support for anyone affected by HIV.

Phone: 071 738 7333.

### **Positive Women Scotland:** c/o

Scottish AIDS Monitor, 26 Anderson Place, Edinburgh EH6 5NP. Scottish AIDS monitor also provides a full range of advice information and support services.

**Rape Crisis Centre:** Physical protection and emotional support.

Phone: 071 837 1600 (24 hours).

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

**Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA):** Information officer keeps up-to-date list of syringe exchanges and drug projects. 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. Phone: 071 831 0330 (admin only). Helpline: 071 242 1010 (12 noon-10pm).

### **The Women's Group, Manchester:**

Telephone: 061 839 4340. Support group for HIV positive women in the North West of England.

### **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. Mo, We, Th, Fr 11am-5pm. Phone: 071 251 6580/6332.



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 are available at centres (such as Positively Women – see listings) for people with HIV/AIDS. Ring National Aids Helpline for details of services in your area.

### **Alternative therapies**

Many women have found alternative therapies beneficial either as an alternative to or coupled with conventional medicine and a very empowering experience. The emphasis is on taking responsibility for your own health and healing process. Although alternative therapies are generally expensive, some HIV organisations offer a free service to people who are HIV positive. At Positively Women we offer: Massage, shiatsu, accupuncture, homoeopathy, spiritual healing and metamorphic technique.

### **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 won't want to take up anything strenuous; start gently and build up as you gain 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 gives you pleasure. Make it fun.

## **Say 'When'**

Drugs do damage to your immune system. If you can stop or cut back on smoking and alcohol it may help. Stimulants like speed, cocaine, poppers are definitely harmful.

## **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 your HIV 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.



## **What is HIV?**

HIV stands for 'Human Immunodeficiency Virus'. This is the virus that causes AIDS.

A positive HIV antibody test means that at some time you have had contact with HIV and your body has produced antibodies to the virus. Antibodies are produced by the body to help fight infection. The HIV antibodies, however, do not kill the virus.

## **So what is AIDS?**

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

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 get infected with HIV. You can put yourself at risk of getting infected:

- **By having unprotected penetrative sex, vaginal or anal, with someone who has HIV infection.**
- **By sharing needles or syringes with someone who is infected with the virus.**
- **From mother to baby – during pregnancy and childbirth. The virus is only passed on to between 13%-30% of babies whose mother is HIV positive. Breast feeding increases the risk of transmission.**
- **From blood transfusions. In Britain blood is screened, but this is not always the case in other countries.**
- **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.