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POSITIVELY WOMEN

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



WOMEN,
DRUGS AND HIV

Rights as a drug user

Never feel pressured into having an HIV test.

If you're arrested, and 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 are 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.

If your blood is taken for any reason, remember it is your legal right to ask exactly what it's being tested for.

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 you become infected with HIV it takes for the antibody to appear. It has been known to take up to a year. So a positive antibody test result means you're almost definitely infected. A negative result does not mean you are definitely not infected; it may only mean that the antibodies have not yet been produced.

Survival Guide

Play it safe

To use as safely as possible, always carry a new set of works and your own drug using equipment (i.e. spoons, filters, etc) which you should never share. However, we all know that using drugs can make your lifestyle chaotic and the reality is that we do not always have a new set of works etc. If that's the case, follow these guidelines if you can.

- **To clean your needle and syringe fill twice with bleach and then flush out. Then twice more with cold 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 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 blood as possible from the syringe by flushing it out with cold water as many times as you can stand. 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 last.

Even if you have not been sharing any drug using equipment, if you're having unsafe sex with someone then this defeats the object as you are still putting yourself at risk. Never have penetrative sex, either anal or vaginal, without using a condom. If you're a working woman, always use a condom. 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 always 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 chocolate or any other tooth rotting rubbish, buy a hamburger or veggieburger 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 yourself to some fresh fruit and get some vitamins inside you. (Intravenous vitamin C is no substitute for the real thing.)

Some people may wish to give up using drugs when they find they're positive; others may feel it's not the right time but would like a script or a safer way to carry on using. We can give you lots of information on whatever choice you make – give us a ring as some of us have been through this too.

Drugs and the immune system

Nobody really knows whether, if you're HIV positive, you run a much greater risk of contracting AIDS if you continue to use drugs. There is some evidence that continued drug use produces a further loss of T4 cells which are the key to the body's defence system and which are attacked by the HIV virus.

It is possible that contaminants in the drugs (street drugs are rarely as much as 40% pure) may have a damaging effect on the immune system. Sharing works may lead to other infections which may activate the cells in the immune system, increasing the risk of disease in a person who is already infected.

Small-scale studies of 'chronic heroin users' have shown various immunological disturbances, which appear to be related to injecting the drug rather than the drug itself.

So injecting appears to be most harmful to health, although any opiate (pain-reducing drug) depresses the immune system whether it is injected, smoked or swallowed.

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.

For up-to-date information and advice about benefits, telephone your nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau or one of the specialist AIDS organisations.

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, contact your nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau – the number's in your phone book.

Clean equipment

In many towns now you can get clean needles and syringes free of charge from needle exchanges. Some chemists also operate needle exchange schemes. For information phone the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA) on 071 430 2341.

Mainliners is an organisation in the drugs and HIV field that promotes self help and provides various services. Phone Judi Wilson, telephone 071 274 4000 ext 443.

Legal advice

Release, 169 Commercial Street, London E1. Phone: 071 377 5905 or 071 603 8654 (24 hour emergencies only) – for drugs related problems in Greater London.

Immunity's Legal Centre, 260A Kilburn Lane, London W10 4BA. Phone: 081 968 8909 – for HIV and AIDS related problems in greater London.

Dental treatment

Some dentists won't treat you if you have HIV infection. Ask your clinic for a list of sympathetic dentists.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for 'Human Immunodeficiency Virus'. This is the virus believed to cause AIDS.

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.

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 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'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 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**

Groups and services

Angel Project: Write: 38-44 Liverpool Road, London N1 0PU. Phone: 071 359 4644.

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

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

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

CLASH (Central Action on Street Health): Young people's advice and support on anything to do with health. Write: 15 Bateman Buildings, Soho Square, London W1. Phone 071 734 1794. Mo-Fr 10am-5pm. Other times, answering machine.

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

Immunity's Legal Centre: Greater London based legal advice project for people with HIV. 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 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.

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.

Praed Street Project: Research project also offers free STD and general women's health service for prostitutes. Contact: c/o Jefferies Wing, St Mary's Hospital, London W2 1NY. Phone: 071 725 1549. Mo-Fr 10am-5pm. Open afternoon We 2-6pm.

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

Release: Advice and information on drug-related problems – including legal problems. Write: 169 Commercial Street, London E1 6BW. Phone: 071 377 5905 Mo-Fri 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. 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.

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).