

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

Contributors

Positively Women (Organization)

Publication/Creation

[1992?]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zhr4jcw2>

License and attribution

Conditions of use: it is possible this item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

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 allow yourself to be pressured into having an HIV test.

If you're arrested, and HIV positive, 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. If your arrest leads to remand or a prison sentence, you may be treated badly by the prison staff or fellow inmates. Policies on HIV vary from one prison to another in terms of confidentiality and work restrictions. Try to find a sympathetic person to find out what your rights are. Positively Women can make visits to prisons, particularly near to London, if you are HIV positive and would like some support.

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. You may also be entitled to a special diet if you need it.

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. It might be wise to find out what the attitude and policy in the prison is toward people who are HIV positive before you make your decision. Remember you might be moved.

(We know that a good diet, reducing stress and having exercise all help the immune system. These things are difficult to control in prison so there is little you can do to improve your health until you're released.)

Some people think you are automatically tested for HIV when you enter prison. This is not the case. 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 antibodies to appear. It has been known to take up to two years but usually takes between 3 to 6 months. 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 cold water, twice with thin, undiluted bleach and flush it through. Then rinse through with clean, cold water as often as possible.
- 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. Some people have suggested that flushing your works through with your own urine is a good way to clean them. Urine is sterile and is often more readily available than bleach or even clean water.

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 becoming ill. Eating well doesn't have to be an expensive business. Rather than grabbing chocolate or any other tooth rotting rubbish, buy a hamburger or vegeburger 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.

Groups and services

Angel Project: Write:

38-44 Liverpool Road, London N1 0PU.
Phone: 071 226 3113.

Black HIV and AIDS Network: Write:

111 Devonport Road, London W12 8PB.
Phone: 081 749 2828;
Helpline: 081 742 9223.

Blackliners: Write: Unit 46,

Eurolink Business Centre,
49 Effra Road, London SW2 1BZ.
Phone: 071 738 7468;
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 office: 071 835 1045;
Helpline: 071 373 9124 daily, 7-10pm.

CLASH (Central London Action on

Street Health): Young people's advice and support on sexual health and safer drug use. Free works and bins.
Write: 15 Bateman Buildings,
Soho Square, London W1V 5TW.
Phone: 071 734 1794. Mo-Fr 10am-5pm. Other times, answering machine.

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.
Write: 205 Stockwell Road,
London SW9 9SL.
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.

Write: The Annexe, Jan Rebane Centre,
12-14 Thornton Street,
London SW9 0BL.
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.

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-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.
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 (12 noon-10pm).

The Women's Group, Manchester:

c/o George House Trust,
PO Box M60 1PU.
Telephone: 061 839 4340.
Support group for HIV positive women in the North West of England.
Phone: 071 251 6580/6332.

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 if you continue to use drugs they could damage your immune system further making you more likely to become ill.

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 find it difficult, 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 071 738 4656.

Legal advice

Release, 388 Old St, London EC1V 9LT.
Phone 071 729 9904 (office hours) or 071 603 8654 (24 hour emergencies only).

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 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.

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.