

**Positively Women : plain speaking about HIV and Aids and how it affects women. Written for women by the experts - women.**

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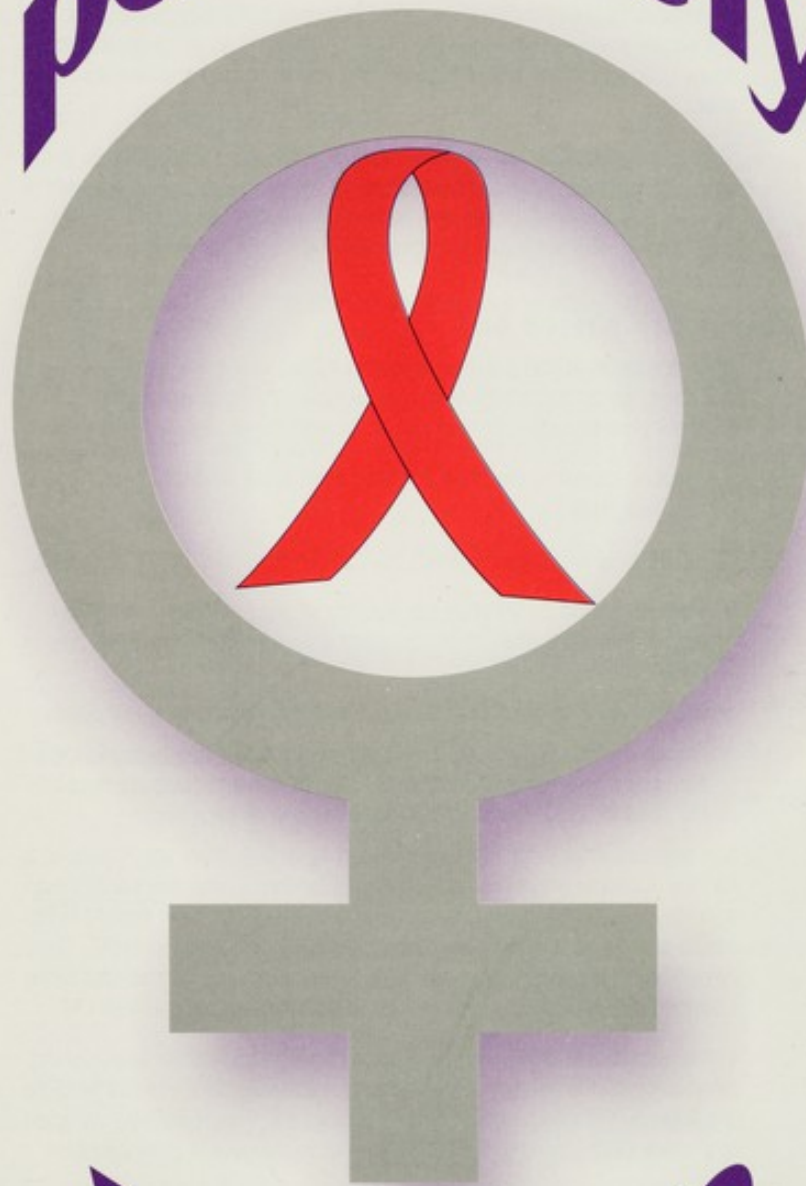
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**positively**



**women**

***Plain speaking about HIV  
and Aids and how it affects  
women. Written for women  
by the experts – women.***

## What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for "Human Immunodeficiency Virus". This is the virus that attacks a person's immune system which is the body's defence against infection and disease.

If you have a positive HIV test result this means that at some point you have been exposed to HIV and your body has produced antibodies to the virus. It is not known whether everybody who is HIV positive will go on to develop AIDS. Many people with HIV feel completely well and have no symptoms for many years.

Over a long period of time, however, the HIV virus does cause damage to the immune system in the majority of people. As a result the body is not able to fight off certain rare illnesses and cancers. When this happens the person is said to have AIDS or "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome".

## How is HIV passed on?

HIV is a weak virus and it is difficult to get infected with it. It is easily destroyed and much harder to transmit than most sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). It cannot pass through unbroken skin or through the air like cold germs.

It cannot be spread by any close contact that does not involve the exchange of certain body fluids.

There are three main ways in which you can put yourself at risk of getting HIV:

- *Through having penetrative sex, vaginal or anal, without using a condom or Femidom (the female condom) with someone who is HIV positive.*
- *Through sharing needles or syringes with someone who is HIV positive.*
- *From a mother to her baby during pregnancy or childbirth. In the UK the virus is only passed on to about 13% of babies whose mothers are HIV positive. Breast feeding increases the risk of transmission.*

It is very uncommon for HIV to be passed on in any other way. However, a handful of people worldwide have been infected from giving oral sex to a man with HIV. These were in circumstances where other STDs were present in the mouth and throat and the sucking partners were immunosuppressed. There have been a few cases of health care workers (doctors, nurses etc) being infected through accidents with needles while caring for patients with HIV.

In the past people who were given blood factor treatment (for haemophilia), blood transfusions or organ transplants sometimes became infected because the donor had HIV. All blood and organ donations in the UK are now screened to prevent this happening, but this is not always the case in other countries.





## How Infection Happens

HIV can only be passed from one person to another in the following body fluids:

**Blood • Seminal fluid**  
**Vaginal fluid, including menstrual fluid • Breast milk**

Infection will only occur if HIV, in one of the body fluids listed above, gets into your bloodstream. This can only happen in certain ways:

- *through the membranes of the genitals and rectum. ie through the vagina and cervix or anus.*
- *directly into the bloodstream, such as when someone sticks a needle into a vein.*
- *very rarely through the mouth and throat.*
- *If a pregnant woman is HIV positive, the baby may contract the virus if it crosses the placenta. The more likely mode is during birth when it comes into contact with large quantities of blood and vaginal secretions, or after birth through breast feeding (a baby's mouth and throat is more sensitive than an adults, so a baby is far more susceptible to infection by this route).*

There have been no recorded cases of people becoming infected through procedures involving piercing such as tattoo, ear piercing or acupuncture. Other, more infectious viruses carried in the blood, such as hepatitis, could be a risk if the equipment is not sterile. Always go to a respectable and accredited practitioner who uses disposable needles and sterile equipment.

## HIV Transmission: Presence-Quantity-Route

Keep in mind the principle of Presence, Quantity and Route when thinking about HIV transmission. These three conditions must all work together in order for transmission to occur.

### **Presence:**

*Live virus must be present in the body or body fluids.*

### **Quantity:**

*The virus must be present in sufficient quantities. Only blood, seminal fluid, vaginal fluids and breast milk contain enough HIV to infect another person.*

### **Route:**

*The virus must find an effective route or entry into the bloodstream in order for a person to become infected.*

## Sex

HIV does not just affect "High Risk" groups of people (ie.gay men, IV drug users and people from some African countries). Worldwide, heterosexual sex is the main route of transmission. The risk is linked more with your behaviour, not your identity.

## Responsibility

Many people who have HIV are not aware of their status and there is no way of knowing by someone's appearance who has it and who does not. Do not presume that someone will automatically tell you. YOU need to take personal responsibility for your own sexual health.

## Communication

Sex is a topic that some women find it difficult to talk about. How, then, are we supposed to assert ourselves and insist that our partners practise safer sex? Being assertive and communicating effectively is a skill. Talking to close, trusted friends about sex is a way of practising. All women who are sexually active need to be aware of the risks involved in certain sexual activities.

## Safer Sex

Safer sex principally means using condoms or Femidoms (the female condom) if you have penetrative sex, or having sex where the penis does not penetrate the vagina or anus. As well as preventing HIV transmission, safer sex protects against pregnancy and most other sexually transmitted infections.

## Vaginal Sex

Having unprotected sexual intercourse is the main route of HIV transmission. Using condoms or Femidoms will make intercourse very much safer. Remember, other forms of contraception, such as the diaphragm (cap), the coil or the pill DO NOT protect you from HIV.

## Anal Sex

Some women enjoy anal sex. It is important that if you are having anal sex that you not only use extra strong condoms but that you also use plenty of lubricating gel. The anus is generally very tight and small tears can occur easily, causing bleeding. The tightness also puts a lot of pressure on the condom. This is lessened by lubrication.

## Condoms

When you buy condoms make sure that they are the right kind for the activity you are planning. Flavoured condoms are really only meant for oral sex (mouth to penis). Condoms with the British Kite mark or the new European CEN mark are recommended for use in vaginal sex. No condom has been specifically tested for anal sex, but extra strong condoms are recommended.

Condoms do also come in different widths, lengths and thicknesses. If your partner finds that condoms restrict his penis, try different ones until you discover the one that is most comfortable.

## Spermicides and Lubricant

Some condoms and spermicidal creams contain a chemical called Nonoxynol-9. As well as killing sperm it also provides some protection against HIV and other STDs. Some people, however, are allergic to it – it can cause abrasions which may actually increase their vulnerability to HIV. If you do experience discomfort, stop using it.

Some lubricants contain spermicides and some do not. If you are allergic to Nonoxynol-9 it is best to use a lubricant such as KY. Lubricants reduce the risk of friction and the condom tearing. Never use oil based lubricants such as Vaseline or baby oil as they weaken and can destroy the condom.

## Female Condoms

Femidoms (female condoms) are an alternative to regular condoms. They also protect against HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. They are made from plastic, not latex and can therefore be used with most lubricants. They are placed inside the vagina instead of fitting onto the penis.

Although it is designed specifically for the vagina, some people use a Femidom for anal sex as well. Femidoms have not been scientifically tested for use with anal sex.

## Oral sex

It is very rare for someone to contract HIV through oral sex with a man who has the virus. There have been about a dozen cases worldwide where this was believed to be the route. There is not one recorded case of a person becoming infected by giving oral sex to a woman who has HIV. Some people choose to use Dental dams (squares of latex) which when placed over the vagina act as a barrier. They may be useful if your sexual partner has thrush or other STDs.



## Oral sex with a man

There is a small risk of contracting HIV through sucking the penis of a man who is HIV positive. There is enough virus in semen to infect another person but it is very difficult for it to survive in the mouth and then get directly into the bloodstream as the stomach and mouth contain enzymes that kill HIV.

- *It is possible to contract HIV if he comes in your mouth and you have open cuts and sores or a throat infection such as Gonorrhoea.*

## Oral sex with a woman

Sucking or licking a woman's clitoris and vagina is even less risky than oral sex with a man who has HIV. Menstrual blood probably has a higher concentration of HIV than ordinary vaginal juices but there have been no reports of anyone getting HIV this way.

- *HIV is present in a positive woman's vaginal juices but the quantity is lower than found in semen.*
- *Vaginal fluids do not get into the mouth or the back of the throat with the same force as a man's ejaculate or in great amounts.*
- *In theory transmission of HIV is possible if you have open cuts or sores around your mouth.*

If the person doing oral sex on you is HIV positive there is no risk of contracting HIV from them as there is not enough HIV in saliva to infect another person.

- *Gonorrhoea and herpes can both be passed on during oral sex. It may also be possible for thrush to be transmitted but there have been no cases reported.*

## Touching

Massage, stroking, fingering, mutual masturbation or rubbing your bodies together carries no risk of HIV infection.

## Sex Toys

Sharing sex toys (dildos, vibrators etc) without cleaning them between partners could, in theory, transmit the virus from one person to another. Clean the toys between users or put a fresh condom on.

## Drugs

If you share drug injecting equipment with someone who is HIV positive you run a high risk of contracting the virus. You also run a high risk of contracting other viruses carried in the blood such as hepatitis B and C. We all know using drugs can often make your lifestyle chaotic and in real life we do not always have a new set of works to use each time. If that is the case, follow these guidelines if you can:

**Draw fresh cold water** through the needle into the syringe and flush 3 times

**Draw household bleach** through the needle into the syringe and flush 3 times

**Draw fresh cold water** through the needle and into the syringe again and flush 3 times.

**Do not use hot water** as it will make the blood congeal so traces may be left behind. Boiling works will have the same effect.

**Always use your own spoon** as it is possible to become infected by blood left on the spoon.

**Always use your own filter.** These too can have infected blood in them.

**If you are splitting a fix** with someone, do not transfer it from one syringe to another unless both syringes and needles are new. One of the syringes or needles may already be infected and you will be running a risk even if the spoon is clean.

## Drugs & Risk Behaviour

Many people use recreational drugs that are not injected, such as ecstasy (E), LSD (trips or acid), cannabis and alcohol. Taking these drugs may put you at risk from contracting HIV if the effects of them mean you lose your inhibitions and find yourself in a situation with someone where you are "out of it" and not in control. HIV is probably the last thing on you and your sexual partner's minds at these times. Try to anticipate these situations, if possible. Prepare yourself by having condoms ready and get into the habit of using them all the time.

## Getting Tested

Many hospitals have special clinics that are completely free, anonymous and confidential. If you are considering going to your GP for an HIV test you should be aware that even making an enquiry at your GP's about an HIV test could mean that it goes on your medical records which could prevent you from getting a mortgage or life insurance.

## Positively Women

An organisation run by women for women with HIV and AIDS. We offer the following services: support groups and one-to-one counselling for women with HIV, information and advocacy, childrens work, speakers, welfare and housing advice. We also have opportunities for volunteering.

Write to us at:

**347-349 City Road,  
London EC1V 1LR**

or phone us on:

**0171-713-0222 (client services)  
or 0171-713-0444 (admin)**

Positively Women produce a range of different leaflets and booklets. Copies can be obtained by contacting us at the above address.

This leaflet has  
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## Groups and Services

### Blackliners

Unit 46, Eurolink Centre, 49 Elfra Road  
London SW2 1BZ  
Phone: 0171-738-7468

### Body Positive

51b Philbeach Gardens,  
London SW2 1BZ  
Phone: 0171-835-1045  
Helpline: 0171-373-9124

### CLASH (Central London Action on Street Health)

Young people's advice and support on sexual health and safer drug use.

11 Warwick Street,  
London W1R 5RA  
Phone: 0171-734-1794

### Mainliners

An organisation for people affected by drugs and HIV.

38-40 Kennington Park Road,  
London SE11 4RS  
Phone: 0171-582-5434

### National AIDS Helpline

A 24 hour national phoneline offering confidential advice, information and referrals on any aspect of HIV or AIDS.

Freephone: 0800-567 123

### National Drugs Helpline

A 24 hour national phoneline offering support, information and referrals for people concerned about drugs.

Freephone: 0800-776 600

### Positively Women

Advice and support for and from women with HIV and AIDS

347-349 City Road,  
London EC1V 1LR  
Phone: 0171-713-0444

### The Terrence Higgins Trust

Information and counselling for HIV and AIDS.

52-54 Grays Inn Road,  
London WC1X 8JU  
Phone: 0171-831-0330