

A guide for women with HIV

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RELATIONSHIPS and SEX



The HIV & AIDS charity for life

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Design Felton Communication 020 7405 0900 Ref: 9501 Illustration: Oliver Gaiger

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This booklet is for you if you are a woman living with HIV. It has been written using the experiences of other HIV positive women and it may help you with concerns, decisions and choices you make when it comes to being sexually intimate with another person.



INTRODUCTION

Being HIV positive can often make you feel that it's just too difficult, or impossible to have a sex life or intimate relationship with anyone. You are the same person you were before you became HIV positive; your ability to form relationships need not alter because of HIV. True, being HIV positive may make things more complicated. There may be extra strains and stresses on you and those around you, but this doesn't have to be a reason to shut yourself off or deny yourself from rewarding and fulfilling emotional and sexual experiences.

WHAT'S SO **IMPORTANT** ABOUT SEX and RELATIONSHIPS?

Different people want different things from relationships and sex. The range of relationships and types of sex are as varied as the people concerned. Being HIV positive does not mean that your needs and wants are the same as all other people with HIV.

There are many reasons for having or wanting to have sex. These are just a few of the reasons that other women with HIV have said about why they have or want to have sex.

- It's a basic human need – like sleeping or eating
- It's a way of having intimacy with another person
- To prove I'm attractive and a sexual being
- Having a partner makes me feel whole
- To feel alive
- To have children
- For fun
- To avoid loneliness
- For love
- For the rush and the excitement
- To get away from 'being HIV positive' for a while

You may not agree with some or any of these reasons. You may have your own reasons for having or wanting sex. Whatever your reasons, having a fulfilling and rewarding sex life is an important part of life for many women, being HIV positive doesn't alter this.

DOES HAVING HIV CHANGE THINGS?

As a woman with HIV you may be questioning some of the thoughts you had before you were told you had HIV. It may be that you believed that HIV positive women didn't or shouldn't have sex. If you still have to deal with some of these thoughts it may be that they are causing you some anxiety. Sexual feelings are part of life and now that you have HIV this doesn't alter.

How is sex different for other women after learning they are HIV positive? These are just some of the things other HIV positive women have said.

- It can be more bother than it's worth
- It's made me more creative when I have sex
- I have feelings of guilt about putting partners at risk
- Fear - I have to be careful of my health
- More complicated but it's sure worth it
- There's no difference
- Rejection is really difficult - sometimes the more subtle stuff rather than dramatic
- Having to talk so much about it beforehand makes it so less sexy
- Libido problems - too much or too little

SHOULD I TELL?

Just as there are risks of rejection when telling people about your HIV, there are benefits. When other people don't know about you being HIV positive they may not offer the support that you need.

It is important that you give some thought to telling sexual partners of your HIV before having sex.

Recently there have been a small number of prosecutions for sexual transmission of HIV. The situation is complex. Currently it seems that if you don't tell a sexual partner you have HIV, and you don't use condoms for all and any penetrative sex, and if you pass the virus on to them, they could make a complaint that could end with legal proceedings against you.

The following are just a few questions to ask yourself before telling others about being HIV positive.

RELATIONSHIPS- PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE

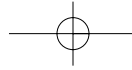
- Why do I want to tell them?
- Why do I feel they need to know?
- What are they likely to do with the information?
- Will they share this information with others?
- What are the benefits and disadvantages of telling them?
- How realistic are my expectations?
- Am I likely to regret telling?
- Is now the right time both for them and me?

Terrence Higgins Trust can help with information and support about telling others or disclosure as it's often called. Contact THT Direct.

Living with HIV can result in many changes to your personal and sexual relationships. Not facing up to them and not learning to deal with them can seem easier in the short term. However it can mean that you are shutting yourself off from fulfilling and pleasurable experiences. In order for you to live well with HIV you must feel happy about yourself and your choices, denying yourself pleasure may result in you feeling depressed and start to have an effect on your health.

Why do other HIV positive women say they want to have safer sex?

- Public and peer pressure
- You feel that you need to be 'responsible'
- If I got an STI - I'd feel that I'd be judged at my clinic
- To avoid passing on HIV
- To protect myself
- I like them to use condoms, then I don't have to worry about contraception
- Makes others feel comfortable
- Avoid saying you are HIV positive
- To keep the sheets clean



Some of these might describe your situation, or maybe none of them do. There are no right and wrong answers when it comes to personal feelings, just what works for you and your partner. For each of these reasons there could be another that is completely opposite like 'liking dirty sheets', 'wanting to say you're HIV positive' or 'wanting to feel irresponsible'.

It is difficult for many people to live up to the standards that they set themselves, so rather than trying and always feeling that you are failing, it may be a better idea to review these standards and see how realistic they really are. Terrence Higgins Trust can help with information, facts and support to help with choices and decisions about sex and relationships within your life.

HIV RISKS - the FACTS and the FICTION

While it's important to understand possible risks, it's equally important not to over-exaggerate them.

Having unprotected sex once or twice whether by choice, because of problems with a condom or because it 'just happens' does not mean that your partner has become infected. Someone being exposed to HIV is not the same as them becoming infected with HIV. It may be that they will become HIV positive this time, maybe the next time it happens or after being exposed to HIV at some other time later on. When we talk about sex between men and women it's important to remember that the risk of passing on HIV to someone who is HIV negative depends on the type of sex you have and what precautions you take. Contraceptives other than condoms do not work as a form of protection against HIV.

Penetrative sex without condoms is the most probable route for HIV to be passed from you to the man, this includes vaginal and anal sex and to a lesser extent oral sex. For many people having an active sex life can mean very different things, so before you start worrying about the risks find out some of the facts. Call THT Direct for advice and support.



REINFECTION

Many women are confused about the possibility of reinfection with another strain of HIV, this is not as simple as you having HIV and the other person also being HIV positive leading to you both being reinfected. There have been only a couple of cases reported world-wide and for reinfection to take place many other factors have to be present. For more information on the facts about reinfection see our website or call THT Direct.

ORAL SEX

The risk of someone becoming HIV positive as a result of oral sex is possible. How probable or even how often it happens are difficult to say, but what we can say is that penetrative sex without condoms remains the most probable way to pass on HIV. The risk of oral sex also varies depending on who is HIV positive and who is doing what to who. If as a woman with HIV you perform oral sex on a man, it is very rare for HIV to get from your body and into his. Also if someone performs oral sex on you, it is very rare for HIV to be transmitted to them in this way.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

Anyone who has sex is potentially at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI). If you get one you can pass it on to anyone you have sex with. Neither of these facts changes because you are HIV positive. It's true to say that most STI's are treatable and this may only alter slightly because you are HIV positive. If you think you may be at risk of STI's, you have more than one sexual partner or your partner does it may be worth considering regular screening at your HIV clinic, ask them for details or call THT Direct for more information.

Concerns about reinfection, oral sex and STI's should not discourage you from having a healthy, satisfying and rewarding sex life. It is worth remembering that very few activities in life are 'risk free' and often using condoms to reduce the risk may be far more practical than giving up sex altogether in order to eliminate any possible risk.

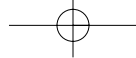
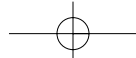
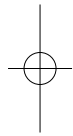
Taking care of your sexual health isn't always about you protecting others. It's just as important that you look after your own health. This doesn't have to be at the expense of giving up on sex and relationships.

Above all you need to remember that sex and having a relationship is as important a part of your life as it can be for anyone else. HIV doesn't take that away. Sexuality is part of who you are as a human being. Of course you have the choice not to have sex at all in your life, if that's what you prefer, but it shouldn't be because of unnecessary fears about the real risk of passing on HIV. Nor should your choices be based on an overly simplistic view on whether it's right or wrong to have sex or relationships because you are HIV positive.

GETTING INFORMATION and SUPPORT

Terrence Higgins Trust provide a range of services and publications to support you in living well with HIV.

**For more information about sex, relationships
and living with HIV contact THT Direct.**



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