

HIV +

Your HIV Status

Having HIV doesn't and shouldn't stop you from living a full and healthy life. With the right treatment and care, you can expect to live just as long as someone who doesn't have HIV.

There's a lot you can do to take care of yourself and feel fitter, healthier and happier.

If you have any questions, talk to your HIV consultant about nutrition, exercise, mental health or any of the other issues you're facing.

You can also reach out to the HIV support and advocacy organisations listed here.

Taking HIV treatment

Current treatment for HIV is not a cure for the virus, but it can keep HIV under control and this keeps your immune system strong.

In the past, older HIV drugs had serious side-effects, but treatment with modern HIV drugs is much better. If a side-effect doesn't go away and is affecting your quality of life, you should be able to change to a different drug. Once you start HIV treatment, taking it every day is important to keep yourself well.

Talk to your HIV consultant if you are having any problems taking treatment.

Eating healthily

We should all aim to eat a balanced diet, without too much fat, sugar or salt. For many people, eating well is a pleasure, and learning how to cook and prepare food for yourself, your family, or friends can be fun.

If you are underweight – perhaps because HIV was already making you ill by the time you were diagnosed – or overweight, or if you have any particular dietary problems or side-effects that make it hard to eat well, then you might benefit from talking to a healthcare professional about your diet.

Exercise and keeping fit

Being active is good for you in lots of ways – it can help to build your muscles, keep your bones strong, burn fat and keep your heart healthy. Some people who are living with HIV experience a loss of muscle mass and strength, so exercise can help prevent this.

You might get your exercise by taking part in a sport, or going to the gym, but everyday activities like dancing, walking or cycling to work and gardening can all help get you moving.

Staying happy and fulfilling your potential

Taking care of yourself is not just about your physical health, but looking after your mental and emotional health too.

Finding out you have HIV can be a shock, and it may take you some time to adjust. Support from your friends and family, or other people living with HIV, can really help when you are finding things difficult.

Once you begin coming to terms with HIV, it's a good idea to think about the rest of your life. What are your goals? What's important to you? Maybe you want to study, have a family, travel or change career – HIV shouldn't stop you doing any of these things!

What else can I do to take care of myself

Many of the things we do to look after ourselves are common sense. Try to get plenty of rest and sleep. If you smoke, try to stop – it isn't always easy, but there is support available to help you. If you are concerned about your alcohol or drug use, talk

to a healthcare professional for advice and support.

It's also important to think about any other health conditions you have; particularly as we get older, we're more likely to experience other health problems.

Sex-Will I, Won't I?

All men, regardless of our HIV status, have the right to healthy and satisfying sex lives.

Men who have been diagnosed with HIV will respond differently when it comes to decisions about having sex. Some men may choose not to have sex for a while. Others may have lots of sex. Some choose to have only casual sex. Others seek HIV positive partners.

There is no single correct choice and the choices you make may change. Many people find that having HIV has no impact on their sex lives while others find it difficult to form sexual relationships because of the prejudices or fear they feel or experience.

Whatever the situation, it is important to become and remain informed about pleasure, desire, and safer sex. Knowing about the many aspects and complexities of HIV and sexuality makes it easier to negotiate the sex that you want, regardless of your HIV status.

It Takes Two

It's not always easy to relax and just get into sex.

As a man living with HIV, it may often feel like you are held solely responsible for avoiding the further transmission of HIV. While you do have responsibility, you are not solely responsible. Everyone involved has an individual and collective responsibility.

In order to become and remain comfortable with the choices that you make, it may be good to spend some time thinking through issues, perhaps talking to other HIV positive men, friends or partners.

Speaking through some issues with a support worker or counsellor may help. For example, issues such as; responsibility for decisions around safer sex, talking about the sex that you want, enjoy, and are comfortable with, and disclosure. Reading about all of the health issues associated with sex is not exactly hot reading. On this site and through the HIV + Sex Booklet we have tried to present the information in a way that will help you to make the right decisions for you.

Not all questions can be answered. You need to make decisions based on the information that you have, and you need to feel comfortable with your decisions. That way you can feel most comfortable with your partner(s), and ultimately have better sex.

Relationships

Relationships, good social support network, peer support.

These can be important in maintaining self-esteem and self-confidence, particularly when newly diagnosed with HIV. Relationships cover a range of issues like affection, intimacy, support, having someone to care about, and somebody who cares about you.

Relationships may vary greatly: for some men, they may mean:

- long-term intimate relationships with only one person;
- loving relationships with one partner and sexual activity with others;
- a series of casual sexual relationships with different people.

Regardless of HIV status, relationships have their challenges, but can also be very rewarding. For some men, the HIV status of their partner is unimportant; for others, it can be a very important factor. For some couples it can feel as if there are three of you in the relationship – You, him, and HIV.

If you are in a relationship when you receive a HIV positive diagnosis, don't assume that your partner might also be HIV positive. The only way to know for sure is if your partner gets tested.

A relationship where one person is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative (sometimes referred to as a sero-discordant relationship) has its own set of challenges and anxieties. Initially, there may be the issue of disclosing (telling the other person you are HIV positive). This may bring up a number of concerns for you both. The fear of transmitting HIV is a concern for some. You may need to renegotiate your relationship boundaries in relation to the types of sex you both want and enjoy. You should both be aware of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and the benefits of being undetectable.

Some men living with HIV find that by having a HIV positive sexual partner they have a less anxious sex life. You may choose not to use condoms because you enjoy the intimacy of condomless sex. This brings its own challenges, including possible health implications.

Anonymous or casual sex is a significant part of the lives of many men who have sex with men. If you enjoy casual sex with someone you don't know it might be useful to discuss and agree on sexual boundaries before you engage in sexual activity.

Whatever relationship you desire; it is important that decisions made about future relationships are not based on HIV alone. How you feel, if it works for you, and if it's what you want and enjoy, are all better reasons for making decisions.

Disclosure

Your HIV status is your personal information

The choice to disclose is an individual one. Deciding who, how, why and when to tell someone you are HIV positive – whether it is a long-term partner or a casual partner – is a personal and often a difficult decision.

Telling a sexual partner can be very different to telling a close friend or family member. A decision to disclose may depend on the kind of relationship you have or you want to have. It may also depend on the kind of sex you want to have.

“Will I see this person just once?”

“Do I desire a longer-term relationship?”

“Should I allow a person to get to know me and all my qualities before I disclose that I am HIV positive, particularly if we don't have sex initially?”

Many men living with HIV have faced rejection upon disclosing to potential sexual partner/s. Sometimes men say no when asked or approached for sex, a date, or a relationship. Other HIV positive men, however, particularly in longer term relationships, have received lots of support.

If you choose to disclose and he decides not to have sex with you, it's worth remembering that his decision to say no may not always be about you personally. He may have little or no understanding of how HIV is or is not transmitted and he may simply be trying to lower his own risk of getting HIV. It is his choice to make. Timing can be important also. It can be difficult to talk about HIV when you have only just met someone, but sometimes a casual relationship may develop into a more long-term one and this could cause problems if you have not disclosed.

Before making a decision about disclosure, many men feel that they want to get to know a person better and develop a friendship, trust and confidence, where privacy will be respected.

Some men find it useful to bring up casual conversations about HIV when they first meet someone.

There are no simple answers, as with many aspects of living with HIV. Talking to other HIV positive people, a support worker, or a counsellor about your concerns may be helpful.

Currently, in Ireland, an obligation to disclose your HIV status, has not been established in a court of law.

Transmission

How does someone get HIV?

The HIV virus is found in semen, blood, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids and breast milk.

The most common ways of getting HIV is through unprotected anal sex without a condom, by sharing syringes or needles to inject drugs or by sharing sex toys without using condoms.

HIV infection can be hard to spot in its early stages. Left untreated, a person with HIV will become very unwell over time.

You cannot get HIV:

- From sharing food, cooking or eating utensils
- From kissing
- From shaking hands or hugging
- From the toilet or swimming pools
- From spitting or biting
- From sneezing

It is extremely unlikely that you will get HIV from oral sex although there is a theoretical risk if you have open sores in your mouth.

Being Undetectable

Viral load is the term used to describe the amount of HIV in the body at any one time. It is determined with a blood test.

A higher viral load is associated with a higher risk of HIV transmission. With successful HIV treatment, the viral load can become so low that it is considered 'undetectable' in the blood, and this reduces the risk of HIV transmission to zero.

The amount of virus in the blood is usually the same as the viral load in other bodily fluids – semen, vaginal fluid and rectal fluid (the fluids commonly associated with the sexual transmission of HIV). This means that when the viral load in the blood decreases, it generally also decreases in other fluids. However, the viral load in each of the bodily fluids can sometimes be different.

For many people on long term HIV treatment, with an undetectable viral load, with no other concurrent STIs, the risk of transmitting the virus to a partner(s) is zero.

A lot of people with HIV see becoming undetectable as a very important benefit of HIV treatment, which decreases anxiety about onward transmission to a sexual partner. People are now taking their viral load into consideration when thinking about safer sex.

If you want to stop using condoms, it is important to discuss this carefully with your partner(s) and ensure they are also comfortable with the decision. This information may be new to a lot of people who do not have HIV; it may take time for someone to understand and trust what you are saying. It is also important to remember that while using this approach will protect your partner(s) from HIV, it does not protect them or you from other STIs.

The following are some guidelines for men who may be thinking about using this approach to reduce the risk of HIV transmission:

- the viral load can increase if doses of HIV treatment are missed. Take pills exactly as prescribed. Adherence to treatment is critical to keep the viral load undetectable;
- check to make sure the blood viral load is undetectable before starting this approach, and get regular viral load tests to ensure it remains undetectable.
- as a guideline, it is suggested that you and your partner(s) wait until your viral load has been undetectable for at least six months before making any decisions about whether to stop using condoms;
- get tested regularly for STIs. If either partner has an STI, start treatment immediately and consider using condoms during

this time as viral load may spike;

- if you have not already done so, get vaccinations for hepatitis A and B;
- use other HIV prevention strategies as much as possible. This will help reduce the overall risk of HIV transmission.

If you use this approach without disclosing your HIV status, it is important to remember that in some countries, having sex without condoms without disclosing that you are HIV positive is a criminal offence, regardless of the likelihood of HIV transmission.

HIV transmission and the Law

Travel, mobility and migration are increasingly part of our lives.

It's important to be aware that in a number of countries, criminal law is being applied to people living with HIV who transmit or expose others to HIV infection. Different countries have different laws.

Currently, criminal prosecution for the sexual transmission of HIV remains untested in Ireland, in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.

The following is an example of how the law has been applied in England and Wales.

This is not legal advice. It is an example that you may wish to consider when making your choices about disclosure.

In England and Wales, people living with HIV may be prosecuted with 'reckless HIV transmission' under section 20 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. It's worth noting that this guidance applies to England and Wales only, although the Offences Against the Person Act still applies in Northern Ireland.

In the UK, based on the criminal prosecutions to date, a person may be prosecuted for reckless transmission of HIV if:

- the person knows he/she is HIV positive.
- the person understands the risk of HIV transmission.
- the person engages in risk taking sexual behaviour, and as a result the person infects his/her sexual partner.
- the person has not previously disclosed his/her HIV status to that sexual partner.

Although UK law does not precisely define 'safer sex', from the cases brought to court so far in the UK, it seems that a person will not be prosecuted if condoms are used for anal sex – as long as they have been used 100% of the time.

The law in the UK is not explicit in relation to a situation where a condom splits or slips off. The advice given in the UK is to disclose HIV status immediately and advise your sexual partner to get PEP.

The UK law covers any serious infection that is passed on sexually, so a prosecution for the transmission of Hepatitis C is also possible.

Enjoying Your Sex Life

Having sex with someone can be an intense experience that can take a lot of emotional and physical energy.

The psychological and social effects of living with HIV can sometimes result in a loss of interest in sex. Some men may be unconcerned by this change. For others, sexual expression is a huge part of who they are.

Losing interest in sex or experiencing difficulties such as getting or keeping an erection are common. Often these can be heightened due to a HIV positive diagnosis.

Sometimes the cause can be physical such as tiredness or feeling ill. It may even be that your testosterone levels have decreased. Some men have problems using condoms, and the use of recreational drugs or alcohol can affect our sexual pleasure.

Sometimes sexual difficulties may be caused by our own thoughts and feelings, such as anxiety about passing infections on, or feeling self-conscious about body image.

Anxieties and pressures of disclosure, stigma and discrimination, and sexual rejection are challenges. All these kind of issues can get in the way of the kind of sex you desire.

At different times we desire different things from sex and from our relationships. Sometimes sex is not always about the emotional connection. Sometimes it's about more basic desires.

Staying Hard

Erection difficulties affect many men, including men living with HIV.

Problems can include:

- not getting hard at all;
- hard-on not lasting long;
- keeping a hard-on when using condoms.

Hard-on problems can prevent some men from using condoms. Others adopt the receptive (bottom) role to get around the problem.

If condoms interfere with your hard-on, it may help if you get the other person to put it on you, or to use a different size condom.

A cock ring can stop the blood leaving the penis once an erection happens, helping to keep you hard. Gripping the base of the penis can have the same effect. Getting more exercise, following a low fat diet, and stopping smoking can all help improve hard-ons.

Using erection drugs such as Viagra™ is not safe for everyone but can often help. They increase the blood flow into the penis, help you get an erection, and make it harder and longer lasting.

It's important to be aware that the underlying cause of hard-on problems may be affected by your mental and emotional health. Erection drugs will treat the symptom, but not the cause. If, for example you still get a hard-on in the morning, erection drugs are probably not the answer. If you have erection difficulties that persist, consider talking to a doctor or another health professional you feel comfortable with speaking to about your sex life.

Viagra™ should only be taken when prescribed by a doctor.

Herbal hard-on drugs can be accessed via the internet and sometimes at saunas. It is important to be aware of the potential dangers of accessing drugs over the internet. Some drugs can interact with each other.

Your Sexual Health

Knowing your sexual needs and planning ahead can be an important part of maintaining your sexual health.

Managing risk is also about managing your health. Be aware and keep informed of any health risks involved in having sex and how to minimise those risks while still getting pleasure.

Pleasurable safer sex starts with each partner taking mutual responsibility for protecting each other and himself. It can be further enhanced by understanding the risks involved in advance of having sex, then negotiating and consenting to the sex you both want.

Although condoms provide the best protection, it's important to remember that what is regarded as safer sex for the prevention of HIV transmission may not protect against some other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like Syphilis or

Gonorrhoea, or gut infections like Shigella.

Men living with HIV may wish to consider sexual activities that decrease the risk of contracting other STI's.

If you are sexually active, particularly with short term or casual partners, it is recommended that you get tested for STIs regularly.

Your Sexual Pleasure (s)

Sexual pleasure can be influenced by many factors and circumstances – the kind of sex you desire, where you meet (home, online, sauna, cinema, backroom, club, pub, party), who you are with (whether having casual sex or a more intimate relationship), and whether you are drinking alcohol and/or using recreational drugs.

Whatever your sexual pleasure or desire, keep one basic principle in mind when you consider any sex act:

HIV-infected semen or blood has to enter the bloodstream of a person through an opening in the skin (or mucous membrane) for HIV to be transmitted.

Anal Sex without condoms remains the most common way HIV is passed on between two male partners, in particular if the HIV positive partner is 'top' (inserting).

If the HIV positive partner is 'bottom' (receptive), a HIV negative partner is still at risk of HIV infection if blood is present which can enter the body through the eye of the penis, or through cuts and sores if another infection is present, for example genital warts or syphilis.

Using condoms for anal sex is the best way to prevent HIV transmission and many other STIs.

Oral Sex presents a very low risk of transmitting HIV. However, if you are HIV positive and you are the 'insertive' partner, the risk is higher if you ejaculate into the mouth of an HIV negative partner especially if your partner has ulcers, bleeding gums and/or a sore throat.

Rough oral sex or deep-throating can cause small cuts in the lining of the throat increasing the risk. Brushing teeth can tear the flesh in the mouth causing gums to bleed also increasing the risk of infection.

Use a condom for oral sex to reduce the risk, and avoid brushing teeth before performing oral sex.

Rimming is only a risk for HIV transmission if blood is present. Rimming can be a higher risk activity for transmitting other STIs such as Hepatitis A or a gut infection like Shigella. Dental dams, or a flavoured condom cut into a square, can be used to reduce the risk by placing it over the anus for rimming.

Sex toys only present a risk of transmitting HIV and other STIs if shared and not cleaned properly (with warm water and soap). Some people use condoms on their toys and change the condom between sharing. Others prefer not to share and use only their own toys.

Fisting presents little risk of HIV transmission. Using latex gloves and plenty of lube can reduce the risks. It is safer not to engage in fisting prior to penetrative sex as this can cause bleeding and therefore increase the risk of HIV transmission during anal sex, particularly if a condom is not used.

Kissing, sucking, wanking, nipple pulling, touching, rubbing, massaging, spanking, stroking, water sports are all safe. Using hands or fingers (not shared) to penetrate the anus are also safe providing there are no cuts, sores or scratches on the hands.

Some bacterial infections, such as Shigella, that affect the gut and cause serious diarrhoea, are transmitted by getting bacteria into the mouth. Washing hands and showering can greatly reduce the risk of transmission and infection.

Sex with other HIV Positive Men

Some HIV positive men may prefer to only have sex with other men who are HIV positive.

This is sometimes referred to as 'serosorting'.

You may decide not to use condoms because you are both positive.

Some men may feel that unprotected sex with other positive men is a way to maximise pleasure and to reduce HIV-related stigma.

It's important to consider that there are still health issues which you may want to think about:

- Hepatitis C, a serious liver infection, can be passed on during unprotected anal sex between men if blood is present. Co-infection with HIV can mean that liver disease develops more quickly and more severely;
- other STIs can be transmitted during unprotected sex;
- sometimes we assume or guess someone's HIV status. Maybe you met on an internet site or at a certain venue where HIV status is assumed. Unless you talk about it, you probably won't know for sure whether another person is HIV positive.

Stigma

HIV is now a manageable chronic illness but stigma and discrimination still persists.

In a sexual context, people are sometimes rejected because they choose to disclose they are HIV positive. While some men may make an informed and personal choice not to have sexual relations or relationships with HIV positive men, others may make decisions and choices that stem from misinformation, myths, fear, and ignorance, based upon an outdated reality of what it is to live with HIV today.

Men have reported being asked stigmatising questions on hook-up apps and sexual networking sites such as 'are you clean/unclean?' or 'have you got anything?'. Name-calling has also been reported when a person discloses their HIV positive status such as 'leper' and 'criminal'.

HIV positive and HIV negative men can play a vital role in challenging negative, stigmatising and judgmental attitudes, particularly on hook-up websites and Apps.

If you are, or have been, offended by comments or questions you have received about your HIV status (or someone else's), and are contemplating challenging this, consider the following:

- Make sure you feel safe and comfortable when starting or joining the conversation. If you are upset or angered by a remark, consider time-out before responding;
- Try to establish the facts about why someone might make a derogatory or stigmatising comment. Some men may make comments because of fear or misinformation;
- Some men may be well-informed about HIV. They may just choose not to have sex with someone who is HIV positive. That is their choice to make;
- Remember this is your opportunity to educate and inform, not to judge someone else;
- Know where to direct people for further information about HIV (this website or to an HIV organisation for example);
- Consider (while no one likes to give in) that some people are not worth the effort and will not change! Know when it is time to end the conversation.

If you are affected by HIV-related stigma, and/or discrimination, seek support and advice.