

Being young and HIV positive



FAST FACTS

- As you grow up you'll want to take more responsibility for your health, but don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Remember, it's your choice to disclose your status as and when you want to.
- A local support group of other young people living with HIV may be one way to share your feelings and experiences.
- Living with HIV shouldn't stop you from having happy and fulfilling relationships and a healthy sex life when you are ready.

Whether you have only [recently found out you have HIV](#) or you have grown up knowing you have [HIV](#), being a young person [living with HIV](#) brings its own challenges.¹

Your teenage years are a time of great change - your body develops and changes during [puberty](#) as you become an adult, and these changes often go hand in hand with lots of emotions. You may also be finishing school, taking exams and thinking about your future. This is also a time when many people have some of their first [relationships](#). It can be an intense and exciting time, but it can also be difficult.

Taking responsibility for your health

If you were born with HIV and were diagnosed at a young age, you may have been going to a doctor or clinic that specialises in child health for a long time. Even if you were diagnosed more recently, perhaps in your early teens, it's likely that one of your parents, or a guardian, has gone with you to the clinic and helped you remember to take your [treatment](#).

As you get older, you may want to take more responsibility for your own health care and treatment. There may be things you want to discuss with a healthcare professional without your parents being present. Eventually, your health care will be transferred to an adult clinic, and this can feel like a big change.

Your parents, and your clinic staff, will still want to know how you are doing, and whether you are taking your treatment, but more of the responsibility will be on you. Think about what you can do to remind yourself to take your treatment, and to manage your appointments. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Many people find support from family and friends helpful, as well as practical things like setting an alarm, or keeping drugs in a pill box with the days of the week on it.²

Telling your friends

Making decisions about whether to tell your friends about HIV is different for everyone. Some people are very open about having HIV - perhaps all your friends and family already know, and it doesn't feel like a big issue for you.

For other people, fear or experience of rejection, bullying or gossip makes telling people about HIV feel like a really difficult decision. Remember, it's your choice, and you don't have to tell people if you don't want to.

Often, young people living with HIV find it helpful to get to know other people in the same situation. There are support groups and activities for young people living with HIV, and this can be a good opportunity to share your feelings and talk about how other people cope. You may decide that you don't want to tell anyone else for now, and that's fine.

If there is someone, or a group of friends, who you want to [share your HIV-positive diagnosis](#) with, then it's a good idea to think about how you might tell them. Think about how they might react, and the kind of questions they might have, so you can be prepared with the information you want to give them. Think about when and where would be a good time to tell them, so you won't be interrupted or rushed.

Having relationships

Some people with HIV worry that they can never have a relationship, or [have sex](#), or that they will never be loved because they have HIV. None of these things are true - people living with HIV fall in love, have sex, have relationships, marry, have children... all the things that people who don't have HIV do too. It's also completely possible to do all of these things without passing HIV on to someone else.

When you start a new relationship, it can be really exciting and fun, and it can be intense, as you find out about each other.

Having a relationship with someone who doesn't have HIV (sometimes called a [mixed-status relationship](#)) might raise some particular questions for you - when should you tell them that you have HIV? How will they react? How can you have sex without passing on HIV?

Deciding how and what to tell them will probably involve a lot of the same considerations as telling a friend. Think about how they might react and the questions they might have. It's up to you to decide how much to tell them and when. You may feel like you want to avoid having a difficult conversation, but bear in mind that if you wait for a long time they may be upset that you didn't tell them sooner.

Just a few words from someone who has been living with HIV for nearly 20 years: it's not that bad and there are times when you forget you have HIV. Eventually, even when you remember you're positive, it's no longer an issue.³

Having sex

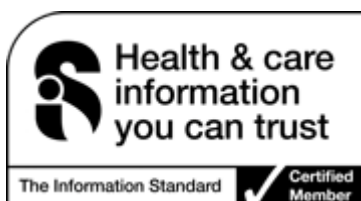
If you're going to have sex, remember that using [male condoms](#) or [female condoms](#) correctly is a really effective way of preventing HIV, [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) and unplanned pregnancy. Many clinics can provide you with free condoms and other contraception, as well as confidential information and advice.

If you are taking HIV treatment and it's keeping the level of HIV in your body (viral load) very low, that also reduces the risk of HIV being passed on.⁴ For women, there are also additional ways of preventing pregnancy, including the contraceptive pill, implant or injection. It's important to tell your doctor if you're taking HIV treatment and contraception together, as some HIV drugs interact with them and make the contraception less effective.⁵

It's a good idea to talk to your partner about these things before you have sex, if you can, so that you can share the responsibility for [having safer sex](#). If your partner knows about HIV, it can make it easier to talk about using condoms.⁶

Having HIV shouldn't stop you from having great sex - you have just as much right to a fulfilling and healthy sex life as anyone else - but don't feel that you have to have sex just because your partner wants to.⁷ It's up to you to decide when you feel [ready for sex](#) and they should respect that.

©iStock.com/simonkr. Photos are used for illustrative purposes. They do not imply any health status or behaviour on the part of the people in the photo.



- 1. Frize, G., *et al* (2011) 'Psychology service evaluation in a clinic for young people (over 16 years) living with HIV and transitioning to adult care', 17th annual British HIV Association conference, Bournemouth, abstract P168
- 2. McDonald, S., *et al* (2011) 'Young people and self-reported adherence to antiretroviral therapy: a HYPNet survey', 17th annual British HIV Association conference, Bournemouth, abstract P198
- 3. Public Health England (PHE) (2016) 'HIV in the UK: 2016 report'
- 4. Rodger, A., *et al* (2014) 'HIV transmission risk through condomless sex if HIV+ partner on suppressive ART: PARTNER study', 21st Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections, Boston, abstract 153LB
- 5. Scarsi, K., *et al* (2014) 'Efavirenz, but not nevirapine antiretroviral therapy, decreases exposure to levonorgestrel released from a sub-dermal contraceptive implant', *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 17 (3): 4, abstract 0131
- 6. Tassiopoulos, K., *et al* (2012) 'Sexual risk behavior among youth with perinatal HIV infection in

the United States: predictors and implications for intervention development', *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 56(2), 283-90

- 7. International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (2010) 'Healthy, Happy and Hot: A young people's guide to rights'

Last full review: 01 May 2015

Last updated: 19 October 2017

Next full review: 15 February 2018