Being young and HIV positive

FAST FACTS

• As you get older, you’ll probably want to manage your own health and treatment but just because you’re becoming an adult doesn’t mean you’re meant to ‘know it all’.

• Remember, it’s your choice as to when, where and how you tell people about your HIV status.

• You might benefit from joining a support group for young people living with HIV to share your feelings and experiences.

• Living with HIV shouldn’t stop you from having fulfilling relationships and a healthy sex life when you’re ready.

Whether you’ve recently found out you have HIV or grown up knowing your status, being a young person living with HIV can have be challenging.

Your teenage years are a time of great change – your body develops during puberty, and it’s often very emotional. It can be an intense and exciting time, but it can also feel difficult to cope with everything.

You may be finishing school and taking exams, and you’re probably thinking about your future. This is also a time when many people have their first relationships.

Whatever challenges you face it’s important to remember you are not alone. Lots of other people have been, and still are in, similar situations. Many people find it helpful to speak to a counsellor or join a support group.
Taking more responsibility for your own health

Whether you were diagnosed at a young age or more recently, it’s likely that a parent or guardian has helped you to take your treatment at the same time each day.

As you get older, you’ll probably want to manage your own health and treatment. Eventually your healthcare will be transferred to an adult clinic, which can feel like a big change.

Think about what you can do to remember to take your treatment and to manage your appointments. For example you could:

- Set an alarm
- create a routine so that you take your drugs at the same time as something that you already do every day - for example after eating breakfast (make sure you follow your healthcare worker’s advice on whether you should take your medication with or without food or at certain times of day as this can vary)
- Keep your drugs in a pill box with the days of the week on it.

Many people find that asking a family member or friend for support is helpful. They might even be able to give you a daily call or text to remind you to take your medication.

Remember, just because you’re becoming an adult doesn’t mean you’re meant to ‘know it all’ or have to do everything by yourself. You’ll still need support from family and friends and healthcare professionals.

You can ask your healthcare professional about any aspect of your health at any time. This includes asking questions about safer sex or contraception. You may want to talk about this without anyone else being present.

Telling your friends

Making a decision about whether to tell your friends about being HIV positive is different for everyone. Some people are open about it – perhaps you’ve grown up with it and it’s not a big issue for you. For others, fear of rejection, bullying or gossip makes telling people really difficult.

Remember, it’s your choice and you don’t have to tell people if you don’t want to. You may decide that it’s just not the right time, and that’s fine.

You may 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, which can help you to find out how other people are coping.

If you want to tell someone, or a group of friends, then it’s good to think about how you’ll tell them. Think about how they might react, and the kind of questions they might have. Think about when and where, so you won’t be interrupted or rushed... and think about how you’ll feel afterwards.
Having relationships

You may worry that you can never have a relationship, or sex, or that you won’t be loved. None of this is true. People living with HIV fall in love, have sex, have fulfilling relationships, marry, have children (without passing on HIV) – all the things that people who don’t have HIV do.

When you first meet someone, it can be really exciting and intense as you get to know each other. Starting a relationship with someone who doesn’t have HIV (also called a mixed-status relationship) raises questions. When should you tell them that you have HIV? How will they react? How can you have sex without passing it on?

While some of these questions do not have a single, easy answer, the good news is there are many reliable ways you can protect your partner from HIV. Taking your treatment to become undetectable, using condoms, and your partner taking PrEP, are all ways of keeping you both healthy.

Deciding how and when to tell a partner involves a lot of the same thinking as telling a friend, and more. For example, they may want to know details that you’re not ready to talk about, such as who your previous sexual partners have been and what you did with them.

Remember, it’s your choice how much to tell them and when. You may want to avoid having a conversation, but be aware that the longer you put it off, the more upset they may be that you didn’t tell them sooner.

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.

- A few words from someone who has been living with HIV for nearly 20 years

Having sex

If you’re going to have sex, using external (or male) condoms or internal (or female) condoms correctly is a very effective way of preventing HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy.

Many clinics can give you free condoms and other contraception, as well as confidential information and advice. There are other ways of preventing unplanned pregnancy, including the contraceptive pill, implant and injection (for women).

If you’re taking HIV treatment and it’s keeping the level of HIV in your body (viral load) very low, the risk of passing it on is much lower. If you’re undetectable you’re untransmittable.

It’s important to tell your healthcare professional if you’re taking HIV treatment and contraceptive drugs together, as some antiretrovirals can make the contraception less effective.
Sharing responsibility for safer sex

Talk to your partner before you have sex 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.

Having HIV shouldn’t stop you from having great sex – you have 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. You can decide when you’re ready for sex – it’s your choice and no one else’s.

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Sources:

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (2020) ‘Healthy, Happy and Hot: A young people’s guide to rights’
Planned Parenthood ‘Living with HIV’ (Accessed April 2021)