



**POSITIVELY ALIVE**

# LIVING POSITIVELY WITH HIV AND AIDS

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NOW THAT I HAVE DIAGNOSED HIV  
POSITIVE WHERE DO I START?



POSITIVELY ALIVE ©  
SOUTH AFRICA



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# LIVING POSITIVELY WITH HIV AND AIDS

NOW THAT I HAVE DIAGNOSED HIV POSITIVE WHERE DO I START?

Many questions may come to mind when you have been given an HIV positive result. Below are a few questions that you may need answered immediately? Following these is more detailed information you may also find helpful.

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## WHAT DO I DO NOW THAT I AM INFECTED?

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1. Resources exist for both medial and emotional support – you are not on your own.
2. HIV is not a death sentence – many people are living with HIV and AIDS and leading healthy, productive lives.

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## HOW WILL I FEEL?

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You may feel normal and healthy even though the virus is in your body.

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## DOES BEING HIV POSITIVE MEAN I WILL DEVELOP AIDS?

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There is a chance that you may continue being healthy for months or years or forever. It is not known who will go on to develop AIDS and how this will happen.

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## WHO WILL KNOW MY TEST RESULTS?

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Only the doctor and counsellor will know your results. They need your informed consent before they can tell anyone else. The doctor is obliged to keep your diagnosis confidential, and may not tell your family or employer or another health worker without your knowledge. Sometimes if you are at an HIV clinic for tests or treatment, the whole team will know that you are positive. This is to your benefit because the team will be working together to help you.

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**CAN I STILL HAVE SEX?**

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Being diagnosed as HIV positive does not mean your sex life has ended. It may require making some changes in your sexual activities but you still have many creative ways of expressing yourself sexually.

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**WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?**

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Research has shown that a positive attitude about your own health can be an important factor in maintaining your health. Getting a positive result can be frightening. Learning to cope can be a slow, painful process. Take your time to adjust to the news as that is one thing you do have is time to learn what a positive result means and you have the time to adjust to the changes if any you can make. It is necessary over time to maintain contact with those around you and to continue with your usual routine and activities.

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**SHOULD MY DOCTOR KNOW THE RESULTS?**

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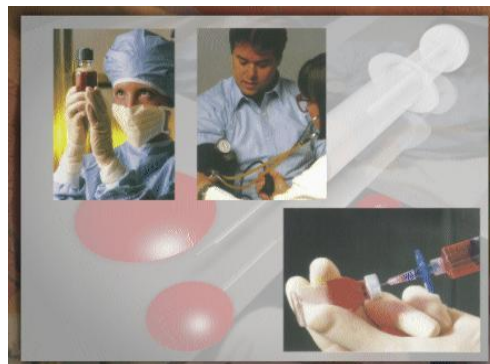
It is a good idea to have a doctor involved from the time you are diagnosed. The doctor can do a check up of your health at regular intervals and should be made aware of any changes in your health so that these can be dealt with promptly.

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**WHAT DOES A POSITIVE RESULT MEAN?**

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The term “HIV positive” means that antibodies to the HIV have been found in your blood. It does not necessarily mean that you have AIDS. It does mean, however, that you are infected with HIV. The virus will remain in your body and you can infect others.



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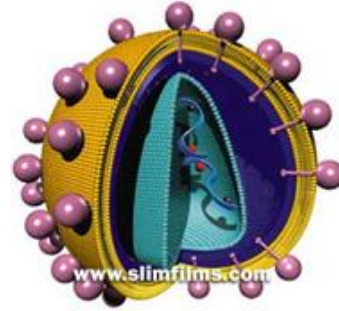
#### WHAT IS HIV?

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HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that leads to AIDS. It is a human virus which may damage the immune system over a period of time in such a way that it cannot fight serious and often life-threatening illnesses.

HIV is transmitted through unprotected anal and vaginal intercourse, and very occasionally, oral sex. It can also be transmitted when HIV-infected blood goes from one person into another, usually through sharing needles.

An HIV positive mother can also transmit the virus to her baby through blood during pregnancy or childbirth and through breast milk during breast feeding.



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#### WHAT IS AIDS?

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AIDS is the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is a collection of illness that occurs when HIV has damaged the immune system to a point where it is unable to fight these often life-threatening infections. It is a syndrome that is acquired i.e., HIV is transmitted from one person to another through specific body fluids rather than genetically.

There are many diseases to which people with AIDS are susceptible. Collectively, these diseases are called “opportunistic” because they are generally unusual and have taken advantage of the damaged immune system. These diseases may affect, for example, the lungs, the brain, the eyes, the skin, the gastro-intestinal tract and the lymph glands.

Other symptoms might occur with an opportunistic infection. They can also occur before the person has AIDS and may be a sign that the immune system is getting weaker. These symptoms are:

- Persistent or intermittent diarrhoea
- Drenching night sweats
- Persistent fever
- Oral thrush
- Swollen lymph glands (lasting 3 months or more)
- Unexpected weight loss (more than 10% of body weight)
- General fatigue
- Herpes and
- Skin infections

In the case of women with HIV, genital tract infections, cervical dysplasia and menstrual disturbances might occur.

Babies with AIDS will usually fail to thrive and may have chronic diarrhoea, fevers, swollen glands, persistent cough, skin infections and recurring common infections.

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#### WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE?

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Medical treatments for HIV and AIDS vary according to the individual needs and specific infections involved. Your loved one can consult an HIV clinic at state hospital or a general practitioner who is registered with the HIV Clinicians Society of South Africa. In general, decisions about medication should be a joint decision between the treating doctor and the person with HIV or AIDS. Sometimes your loved one may wish to include you in these decisions. Broadly speaking the treatment options are:

- Antiretroviral (ARV) medication to slow down the reproduction of HIV. There are now a variety of drugs available which when used in combination with each other, also known as Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART), produce encouraging results in maintaining the health of an HIV infected person. The HIV clinician will provide advice on when to start anti-viral drugs. These drugs are now available for free from state hospitals and clinics and are also provided under the chronic benefit cover of most medical aid.
- Medication to prevent the development of certain opportunistic and other infections, such as Tuberculosis, PCP and pneumonia. These are called prophylactic drugs.
- Medications to treat specific illness and opportunistic diseases when they occur. These medications are increasingly effective and new ones are being developed all the time.





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#### WHEN YOU FIRST GET YOUR RESULTS:

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Learning that you are infected with HIV can seem devastating. People who receive a positive result are often shocked by the news, even if they have suspected that they were positive before they took the test. It is important to realise that this is not a death sentence. It will probably be important for you to understand as much as you can about the virus and to be able to separate the facts from the rumours and myths. You may have a lot of living to do, and right now a lot to learn about your own body. There are many things you can do and choices to make which will help you to remain as healthy as possible.

Everyone who is diagnosed with HIV responds to the news in their own unique way/ Some common, very normal, feelings are rage, sorrow, loss, fear, confusion, anxiety, guilt and resentment. Maybe you feel depressed. Or don't feel anything at all. It may be a relief to know one way or the other what your HIV status is. It is possible that you may want to deny the test results. You may also feel that you are falling apart and withdraw into yourself. All of these are common reactions and nothing to be afraid or ashamed of. No one expects you to take the news easily, or to be unaffected.

Many problems and potential difficulties could present themselves all at once. Some people will want to talk about them all the time, other not at all, and many will only talk when they feel ready. Try not to bottle up your feelings, they will not go away and may resurface when you least expect it. You may need to talk to someone; a counsellor or a trusted friend may help.

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#### DENIAL:

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As mentioned, an HIV positive result can lead to denial. This means refusing to believe that this is really happening to you, avoiding the issue or avoiding the consequences. This reaction is quite normal, it is the mind's way of helping you cope with the news by pushing it away at first and then slowly coming to accept it. Denial becomes more worrying if it means you don't preserve your own health or if you infect others with the virus. Try and commit yourself to healthy living and safer sex even if you find it hard to accept that you are positive.

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**SHARING THE NEWS: WHO TO TELL:**

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Deciding which people to tell is a difficult decision to make. As a general rule, think over who you want or need to tell and how and why you will tell them. They may not understand HIV as well as you, so you may find it useful to talk through these issues of “telling: beforehand. This will allow you to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of telling and therefore make a clear and thoughtful decision.

Although it may be difficult, you should consider telling someone with whom you might have had unprotected sex or with whom you have shared needles. These people might want to make decisions about HIV testing. If you are in a relationship at present, are you ready to tell your partner about your status? What are the implications of not telling them?

You may want to avoid telling landlords, bosses, co-workers and the like, since you being HIV positive poses no threat to them. You need only inform someone of it is helpful for you and them to know. As mentioned earlier, it would be helpful to tell your own doctor or the clinic where you are regularly treated, so that if you get ill there will be no unnecessary delays with treatment. You may also want to inform your dentists for early diagnosis of HIV-related mouth infections.

Any person you tell is bound by law to keep this information confidential. If a health worker wishes to inform anyone else, such as another health worker or your sexual partner, they first have to ask your permission. Remember too that there could be consequences of knowingly infecting another person.

Whoever you tell, it is always better to inform someone personally. Be sure to give yourself enough time to have learnt about HIV and how you feel about it. Be prepared for telling. The person you tell will probably experience similar reactions to you when you first heard your diagnosis. Some friends and family will rally around and be supportive while others might not know how to deal with their own fears and misconceptions about HIV and AIDS.



Give them some time to adjust to the news. Think about these suggestions and do what feels most comfortable for you.



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#### WHEN TO TAKE PRECAUTIONS:

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In general, normal standards of hygiene and cleanliness are sufficient.

- Cuts and grazes should be covered with a waterproof plaster. If you cut yourself, you should clean up any blood spillage yourself with paper towel, and surfaces should be washed over with diluted household bleach (1 part bleach to 10 parts water). To be absolutely safe, other body fluid spillages should be dealt with in the same way. Anyone helping you should wear rubber gloves – in case they have any cuts or breaks in the skin. If they get blood on themselves, they should wash it off with water and soap.
- If blood gets on clothes, soak them first in a bleach solution (as above) and then a normal hot wash with detergent will be sufficient.
- Used tissues, plasters, dressings, tampons, sanitary towels or disposable nappies should be tied up in a bag and put in a lined rubbish bin, or burnt if this is not available.
- For sharp items, put in a tin before disposal in a heavy bag.

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#### WHAT NOT TO WORRY ABOUT?

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- There is no risk to you or others from social contact and shows of affection such as hugs, shaking hands and just being close to people.
- Sharing a toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities at home or at work presents no cause for concern. It is perfectly adequate to follow normal standards of hygiene and cleanliness.
- The virus is not airborne and cannot be passed through coughing, sneezing or spitting.
- It cannot be caught from cups, cutlery or crockery. No special precautions are required.
- It is fine to eat in restaurants, go to out bars and clubs and generally to lead a normal life at home, at work and socially.





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### SAFER PRACTICES YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT

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Since HIV is most commonly transmitted sexually, you might experience a change in your sexual desires after testing positive for HIV. You can still have sex but there are several issues to be dealt with that you may not have faced before. If you are going to have sex, always practice safer sex. The virus is in your blood, semen or vaginal fluid and you could infect your partner. Remember, HIV isn't the only sexually transmitted disease and all of them can be detrimental to your health. You also need to avoid re-infecting yourself as this can activate the HIV in your body. There is evidence to suggest that exposure to different strains of HIV, or simply repeated dosages of HIV can be harmful.

Safer sex can be defined in one sentence: no exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood. Stick to masturbation, body rubbing, massage and body kissing. If you have intercourse, use a condom. For anal sex, use plenty of water-based lubricant like KY jelly and try to use stronger condoms. Make sure that you know how to use a condom correctly. Condoms are free at many clinics and at most workplaces.

Avoid sharing needles, syringes or any other equipment that could contain blood. In order to inject heroin, cocaine, non-prescribed steroids and other such chemicals, blood is left in or on the used needle and can transmit the virus. For this reason you should not share needles and syringes (works). If you chose to do so then it is best to learn how to clean your works, pour some cold water into a glass, dip the needle in and draw the water up into the syringe. Squirt the water back out into the sink. Repeat this process another two more times. Then pour some bleach into the glass with a mixture of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water and repeat the filling and emptying process again three times. Rinse out the glass and fill it with water again and repeat the process with the water. It is now ready for use again.

DO not share razors or toothbrushes or anything that could have blood on it.

You should not have live vaccinations such as yellow fever. If you need a vaccination, please check that it is not a live vaccine and discuss it with your doctor.

Do not donate blood or semen.

Do not donate any of your organs.





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## HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

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Having a healthy lifestyle will boost your immune system and provide you with protection. Try to maintain a balanced diet, sufficient exercise and enough rest and sleep. It is also important to cut down or manage your stress.

**Diet:** You should be eating a healthy diet. A balanced diet includes many different kinds of food. The key is to eat a variety of foods. To help you deal with HIV infection the food you eat should provide you with lots of nourishment and energy. Many people lose weight with HIV, so eat as much food as you like to try to control your weight. It is preferable to eat fresh fruits and vegetables as opposed to frozen or canned varieties. Try not to overcook vegetables because this will kill important minerals your body needs. Alcohol, caffeine and sugar can suppress the immune system so keep intake of these to a minimum.

Wash all foodstuffs to ensure you do not eat any pesticides. If you wish to take extra supplements research shows that using one good multivitamin is the only supplement that is scientifically proven that will enhance your health. It is also important to drink plenty of water so as to avoid dehydration, especially if you have diarrhoea. If you need to know more about healthy eating habits, contact your nearest health clinic who should be able to give you're the correct information.

**Stress:** It is known that either physical or emotional stress can harm your immune system. What you are going through right now could be stressful for you. Even so, you will need to find ways to cope that are comfortable for you. The following list might help to de-stress you:

- **Find someone you trust to talk to about your feelings.**
- **Exercise, but don't push yourself if you feel sick.**
- **Avoid or resolve stressful relationships**
- **Meditate**
- **Attend support groups**
- **Maintain a regular sleeping pattern**
- **Have quality leisure time**
- **Make time for fun**



- **Go for counselling**
- **Take up yoga**
- **Avoid taking on new and stressful projects**
- **Find a job that you enjoy. Be wary, however, of resigning from your job because a new employer might not provide support for HIV positive employees.**

**Sunlight:** Studies have shown that the virus can be activated by excessive exposure to sunlight or ultra-violet light. This does not mean you have to stay out of the sun but excessive sun bathing is not recommended and you should wear sun creams.

**Pets:** Cats, birds and fish carry certain diseases which can be transmitted to humans and could be very harmful to you if you have a weakened immune system. If you own a cat, bird or fish you should wear rubber gloves and a mask when changing the litter box or cleaning the cage or tank.

**Drugs:** Recreational drugs, such as poppers, speed and cocaine are stimulants and may suppress your immunity. It is also sensible to stop smoking cigarettes. Giving up completely may be stressful in itself. If you can, try to cut down gradually and change to a lighter brand. Drinking water whenever you get a craving works for some people. Alcohol is also a drug; drinking in moderation is fine, but try not to get drunk. Alcohol may react with some medications and also your body will become sensitive to alcohol if and when the disease progresses.

Other drugs, including dagga and mandrax, can harm your immune system. Some prescribed drugs may do the same and you should check these with your doctor before taking them.

**Doctors:** You should begin to monitor and maintain your health under the direction of your doctor or clinic. If your doctor is not familiar with HIV, you are entitled to ask him or her for a referral to a doctor or clinic with HIV experience. You can also contact the HIV Clinicians Society of South Africa for a reference to a practitioner experienced in HIV treatment. Your health is your responsibility, not your doctor's. Should you develop any of the symptoms mentioned earlier, it is advisable to report them to your doctor. The earlier an infection is diagnosed; the sooner treatment can begin, thus increasing your chances of recovering. Should any other worrying symptoms occur, it would be wise to seek your doctor's advice.

Your doctor may want to do tests to determine the extent of the damage to your immune system. This is the best way to monitor HIV infection. One of the most common tests is a T-cell (or CD4) count. If the T-cell count shows a consistent downward trend, there are medications, (ARV's) which could be prescribed to slow the replication of the virus and therefore give your body the chance to recover the strength on your immune system.



**Pregnancy:** If you are pregnant, or are thinking of having children, it is important to know that a baby has about a 30% chance of being infected by its mother without medical intervention. A baby born to an HIV positive mother will test HIV positive at birth because the baby is born with its mother's antibodies. It usually takes about 12 to 18 months after the birth before the doctors can tell whether a baby is infected. Pregnancy should be discussed at length with a qualified counsellor or medical doctor.

**Talking:** It can be very helpful to talk to another person about what is happening to you. Counselling can help you feel comfortable with the person to whom you are talking. This will depend on various factors – if you feel you are not comfortable with your counsellor, don't be afraid to ask to see someone else. No counsellor should be offended by this. Being positive is a personal matter. It is also important to remember that there are many others who are also HIV positive and that you are not alone. However, you may feel from time to time that people don't understand or care. Talk to your counsellor about including family or friends in counselling, joining support groups and befriending others who are in the same situation as yourself. This will enable you to meet other people and get the help and support you need.

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**CK2010/00285/23**



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