

WOMEN AND HIV: THE BASICS

DOES HIV AFFECT WOMEN AND MEN DIFFERENTLY?

Women with HIV can live long, healthy lives with care and treatment. At first, studies suggested that women progressed more quickly to AIDS than men. But recent research has not shown that to be true. Women are more likely to experience a lack of access to HIV testing, care, services and support and to pay more attention to the health needs of their loved ones than their own. Also, HIV-positive women may encounter stigma and unfounded stereotypes. However, services and support do exist for women, even for women who do not speak English—ask your local AIDS service organization. Also, healthcare providers, including general practitioners, gynecologists and obstetricians, are becoming more knowledgeable about HIV.

ARE WOMEN WITH HIV AT GREATER RISK FOR OTHER HEALTH PROBLEMS?

It's important to see your doctor on a regular basis and to speak honestly about your sexual health concerns. Certain gynecologic problems are more common, more serious and harder to treat in women with HIV, and some do not cause noticeable symptoms. These problems include: genital herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV, which causes warts and pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions of the cervix and anus), pelvic inflammatory disease and vaginal yeast infections. Many of these conditions are treatable, and herpes symptoms may be reduced with medication.

DO HIV DRUGS WORK AS WELL IN WOMEN?

Yes. While research on HIV treatment in women has been limited, all HIV drugs appear to work as well in women as in men. HIV-positive women may be more likely to experience certain side effects, however. This may be because certain HIV medications reach higher levels in the bloodstreams of women, possibly due to their generally smaller body mass, different metabolism or hormones. Some side effects are normal when beginning treatment, but speak to your doctor if a side effect persists.

I FOUND OUT I WAS POSITIVE DURING PREGNANCY. WILL MY BABY GET HIV?

It's very important to get prenatal care if you're pregnant and are infected with HIV, to ensure the health of your baby. With the right treatment, your risk of transmitting the virus to your baby is less than 2 percent.

CAN I GIVE HIV TO MY HUSBAND OR BOYFRIEND? OR TO MY CHILDREN OR COWORKERS?

HIV cannot be transmitted through casual contact such as hugging, kissing and sharing eating utensils. Nor can it be transmitted via doorknobs, swimming pools or toilet seats. In addition, men are much more likely to give HIV to women than vice versa. Condoms can protect both you and your partner from further sexually transmitted infections.

QUICK TIPS

Caring for yourself as a woman means connecting with the services you need. Here's what's out there:

■ FIND THE RIGHT DOCTOR

It's important to work with a doctor you trust and feel comfortable with. You want to be able to discuss issues such as sex, pregnancy, drug use or depression without being judged. To find a doctor, check with a local AIDS service organization (find one at directory.poz.com), talk to another doctor you're seeing or ask friends for referrals. You may work with a primary care doctor who knows about HIV. You can also find an infectious disease specialist or a gynecologist who knows about HIV.

■ CHECK YOUR MEDS

Several HIV drugs can alter the way the body processes birth control pills containing ethinyl-estradiol. Make sure your doc knows about all prescription and over-the-counter remedies you're taking.

■ GET CHECKED

Cancerous changes in the cervix and anus, caused by HPV infection, are more common among HIV-positive women. To check for these, experts recommend a Pap smear when HIV is first diagnosed, followed by a second one six months later. If everything is OK, annual Paps will do the trick.

■ GET SUPPORT

There are lots more support services to help positive women facing medical problems, family struggles, housing or financial worries, domestic violence, depression and drug abuse. Talk to your doc or a local AIDS service organization.

For more tips about women and HIV, visit POZ.com