



sheet

Women and HIV Newly Diagnosed

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fact

- If you have had an HIV test and your result was positive then this fact sheet offers you some information and ideas to consider about your immediate future.
- An HIV positive test result doesn't mean you have AIDS.
It means you have come in contact with HIV and have been infected. Being HIV positive is also referred to as antibody positive and seropositive.
- For more information about what the test result means see the Testing Fact Sheet in this series.

Feelings and reactions

You may be feeling stunned, frightened, angry, anxious, confused, despondent. You may have a sense of denial or grief, or a combination of these emotions, or you may be feeling nothing. You may feel like you have to reconsider everything in your life or feel overwhelmed with the decisions you might need to make. Many women who are HIV positive say that living with HIV creates greater uncertainty and more decisions in their lives. There can be huge emotional swings and a feeling of hopelessness, ordinary life events can become intensified. Longer term, some HIV positive women say they feel empowered by their experience of HIV, but right now you may be feeling a lot of mixed emotions. *It's OK to take this slowly, there's a lot to think about.*

The most important thing to do is to get the **support, care and information** you need right now to start to make sense of it all.

Support

It is important early on to find a doctor and/or complementary therapist you trust, who listens to you and in whom you have confidence, in dealing with HIV. It may be the doctor you have now or you may want to work with a new doctor who specialises in HIV. Only specially trained doctors are able to prescribe the anti-HIV drugs you may want to use for treatments, so bear this in mind when choosing a doctor. You may want to consider a 'shared-care approach' where you work with both your own GP and a doctor with special knowledge of HIV issues for women.

It is important that you have someone else you can talk with about what you are feeling. This may be a close friend, partner or family member, or you may want it to be someone less directly involved in your life eg a counsellor, social worker.

In NSW you can call the Women's Peer Support Project at the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) Ph (02) 9206 2012 to speak with another positive woman,

about what you're feeling and facing, your questions and confusion. Many women have found it invaluable to talk to other women who are in similar situations and to hear how they have dealt with issues such as relationships, treatment choices, decisions about children and staying well.

Many women have found talking to a counsellor has really helped them through difficult stages and enabled them to deal with their feelings. A counsellor can also be helpful in working out if, who, what, how and when you might want or need to tell some people in your life that you are HIV positive. Social workers attached to your local hospital or community health centre may also be helpful contacts.

Who you might want to tell

In thinking about who you might want to talk with about being HIV positive, the key thing to bear in mind is who you trust and who you think will be supportive, helpful and non-judgmental.

It is sometimes hard to know if people are going to be supportive or what their reaction will be when you tell them, so you may want to tell only a few people at first. Often you have to act as the educator and supporter to the people you are telling and this may put an extra burden on you. ACON offers support to partners, family and friends of HIV positive people - Ph: (02) 9206 2000 for more information. All Area Health Services have counsellors. The ACON branches in the Illawarra, Hunter, Western Sydney and Northern Rivers will also be able to offer support.

You may want to think about whether to tell family or friends about your situation, and if so which ones. You need to consider how they will react eg. will they judge you, will they be supportive, will they respect your wish for confidentiality? A counsellor can be really useful in helping you work out some of these things.

fact sheet 2 of 6

A series of fact sheets for women about HIV.

- 1 Testing
- 2 Newly Diagnosed
- 3 Symptoms
- 4 Treatments
- 5 Pregnancy
- 6 Parenting

Produced by
Family Planning NSW
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ACON

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Partners

If you have a partner you may want to tell him or her that you are HIV positive. It could be difficult to do this but their support may be important. You may feel scared that he or she might leave you, be angry, accusing or judgmental. It would be good to talk over some of these possibilities with someone, to consider what you might feel and/or do if your partner reacts this way. Remember this will probably be as big a shock to her or him as it has been for you. Your partner needs to consider having an HIV test, as should anyone else with whom you have had unprotected sex or shared injecting equipment.

Children

Some women who already have children wonder whether they will be good mothers after they discover they are HIV positive. Some worry that they may be putting their children's health at risk through everyday activities. The reality is that you will be the mother you have always been to your children and you are not putting them at risk by loving and caring for them, and by doing the things with and for them that you have always done. Some women describe feeling as if they are "an infectious thing" rather than a human being and fear infecting those around them especially their children. **Neither your children nor your partner will become infected with HIV through everyday activities.**

Many women who are HIV positive and don't have children at the time of diagnosis wonder if this means they can't or shouldn't have children in the future. Some HIV positive women have had children, some have chosen not to have children and others are still considering this possibility.

Your circumstances and the issues involved in this for *you, only* you know and can decide on.

For more information about pregnancy related issues see the Pregnancy fact sheet in this series.

Who do you have to tell

You are not required by law to tell anyone you are HIV positive, apart from the two exceptions outlined below.

1. **Sexual Partner(s)** Being HIV positive doesn't mean you have to give up having sex or anything else in life you enjoy. In NSW the law says you are obliged to tell anyone you have sex with that you are HIV positive. You may want to talk with another HIV positive woman or a counsellor about ways to deal with this and how to talk about safe sex. Call the Peer Support Project at ACON Ph (02) 9206 2012.

Talking about HIV means you are in a better position to talk about the sort of intimacy you want and to work out with your sexual partner(s) how to have safe sex.

"Although my partner (and I) are Positive, we use condoms because neither of us wants other STDs"

2. **Australian Immigration Department** To gain permanent residency in Australia, the law requires immigrants to have an HIV test and to provide the Department of Immigration with the results of this test.

You don't have to tell your employer, colleagues, dentist, doctor, workmates or anyone else.

However you may *want* to tell some of these people and/or others if you think they would be supportive of you or if you think they need to know in order to provide you with the best possible medical and/or dental care.

If you are refused any service because you are HIV positive or assumed to be HIV positive, it is discrimination and is against the law. Contact the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission on, Ph (02) 9284 9600, or 1 800 021 199 or the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, Ph (02) 9318 5400, or 1 800 670 812.

Living with HIV

You will have many ongoing decisions to make including treatments and therapies which you might consider. You can discuss treatment options with your doctor and/or complementary therapist.

The Treatments Officer at the AIDS Council of NSW is a really good contact, Ph 1 800 816 518.

Other support services include the many services and projects at

- AIDS Council of NSW Ph (02) 9206 2000 or 1 800 063 060, and local AIDS Councils
- Sexual Health Centres
- Family Planning Clinics
- People Living with HIV/AIDS (NSW) Ph (02) 9361 6011
- Albion St Centre Ph (02) 9332 1090, Albion St counselling (toll free) 1800 451 600
- the HIV Co-ordinator at your local Area Health Service and Community and Women's Health Services.

For information about support services, read CONTACTS, a directory of services for people with HIV/AIDS in NSW, available from People Living with HIV/AIDS (NSW) Inc, Ph (02) 9361 6750.

**For more specific information on
HIV treatments refer to the
Treatments Fact Sheet
available in this series.**

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.