



Campaigning
For Equality

Women's Equality Women's Health – HIV and AIDS



An advice leaflet
for Usdaw Members



What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for 'Human Immunodeficiency Virus'. It is a virus which attacks the immune system. If left untreated, HIV can severely weaken the immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to infection and disease.

The term AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is used to describe a situation when someone's immune system has been severely weakened by the HIV virus. In the UK, the term Advanced HIV is often used instead of AIDS.

Women, HIV and AIDS

HIV and AIDS can affect anyone. Until recently women have largely been ignored in the debates about HIV and AIDS. But HIV and AIDS are important issues for women.

Everybody should have ready access to straightforward information about such a vital subject. This leaflet aims to ensure that all Usdaw members are in this position.

It is important to make it clear that HIV cannot be transmitted through activities such as shaking hands, hugging, kissing, sharing cutlery, using toilets or sharing workplace facilities with someone who is living with HIV. Many people living with HIV are discriminated against because people are not fully aware how HIV is transmitted, this should be challenged if it occurs.

Why are HIV and AIDS an issue for Usdaw?

HIV and AIDS can be difficult for people to think and talk about. Some of the language used in this leaflet is direct. This has been necessary in order to make the points clearly and accurately.

Thousands of people are affected by HIV and AIDS. Some will have HIV and may develop AIDS. Others may have family, friends and workmates who are affected directly or indirectly by HIV and AIDS. It is particularly important for women, who take on the key caring roles in our society, to know what HIV and AIDS are all about.

Finally, it is crucial that any workplace issues associated with HIV and AIDS are dealt with in an informed and supportive way. This leaflet aims to provide basic information to all members about a difficult and complicated subject.

How does HIV spread?

It is difficult to become HIV positive. However, there are ways in which you can put yourself at risk.

- You are at risk by having unprotected penetrative sex with someone who is HIV positive. This includes vaginal and anal sex. It is known that it is easier for the virus to pass from a man who is HIV positive to an HIV negative woman, than for a woman who is HIV positive to pass it to an HIV negative man. So, women are more at risk. Anal sex increases the risk of transmission for both sexes. There is a slight risk in oral sex.
- You are at risk by sharing drug injecting equipment ie needles, syringes, spoons and filters, with someone who is HIV positive.
- There is a risk from blood transfusions. In Britain blood is screened, but this is not always the case in other countries. There is no risk of becoming HIV positive from being a blood donor.
- It can be passed from a mother, who is HIV positive, to her baby during pregnancy and childbirth. However, in countries like the UK, where effective treatments are available, babies are rarely born with HIV. HIV can also be passed on through breastfeeding, therefore mothers who are HIV positive are advised not to breastfeed.
- There is a risk by using semen from a man who is HIV positive for donor insemination. In Britain screening is done in all insemination clinics, so the risk lies in making personal arrangements if using semen from a donor who has not been tested.



Avoiding the risks

There are things you can do to lower the risk of infection.

- Practise Safer Sex. This means using a condom during penetrative sex. Penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) without using a condom correctly is very risky. Anal sex is particularly risky.
- Oral sex is more risky during a menstrual period or if the active partner has cuts or sores in their mouth.
- If you are a drug user, the only certain way of not getting infected with the virus, or passing it on through drug use, is always to use your own equipment, and to use a new set of equipment every time. Cleaning equipment is a last resort, although it is better than taking no precautions at all. Cleaning will lower the risk of infection, but it is a lower risk – it does not remove it altogether.
- PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) is a medical treatment which can reduce the likelihood of HIV infection after exposure to the virus. If you have been put at risk of HIV infection you should visit a sexual health clinic or A&E who may prescribe PEP if appropriate. PEP needs to be taken as soon after exposure as possible to increase its chances of working. It can be taken up to 72 hours after exposure, however it is much less likely to be effective when used this late.

How do you know if you have been infected?

You can get tested for HIV for free at a local sexual health clinic, or at your GP. There is no such thing as an 'AIDS test' as AIDS is simply a term which refers to a certain level of HIV progression.

People with HIV may have a short illness soon after getting the virus (although not always) but can then feel well for a long time. Most people will only notice further symptoms of HIV after a few years. That is why it is important for anyone who is sexually active, or who shares injecting equipment, to get tested regularly.

- HIV is usually detected by a blood test. An HIV test can detect 'antibodies' (made by the body to try to fight HIV) and/or 'antigens' (a protein found in the HIV cell).
- Most HIV tests involve sending a blood sample to a laboratory for testing, but rapid tests are also available which use a finger-prick or saliva sample, giving results within minutes.
- It can take between three weeks and three months after being infected with HIV for the virus to show up in testing. If the most recent risk of getting HIV was within the last three months you should still be tested straight away, but you will be advised to have another test a few weeks later.
- If no sign of infection is found the test is 'negative'; if infection is found it is 'positive'. Testing positive doesn't mean a person has AIDS or will go on to get it, but it does mean they can pass HIV on if, for example, they have unprotected sex or share injecting equipment.
- Some people are HIV positive for years, without progressing. There is no test which can show whether someone with HIV will go onto become ill, or how long this may take. With early diagnosis, treatment and healthcare, people living with HIV can now expect a relatively normal life expectancy.
- If you have an HIV test at your GP, this will appear on your medical record and can be seen by your GP, practice nurse and other health professionals involved in your care.
- If you go to a 'GUM' or sexual health clinic, your records won't be seen by anyone outside the clinic, including your GP.
- If you are considering taking a test, you should seek advice. If you decide to have a test, it is essential that you get counselling before and afterwards. Phone a helpline or ask for counselling at the sexual health clinic.
- If the test is positive, and you would like to speak to other women in the same situation, call Positively UK on **020 7713 0444**.

With early diagnosis, treatment and healthcare, people living with HIV in the UK can now expect a relatively normal life expectancy. A positive result does not necessarily mean that someone will develop AIDS.

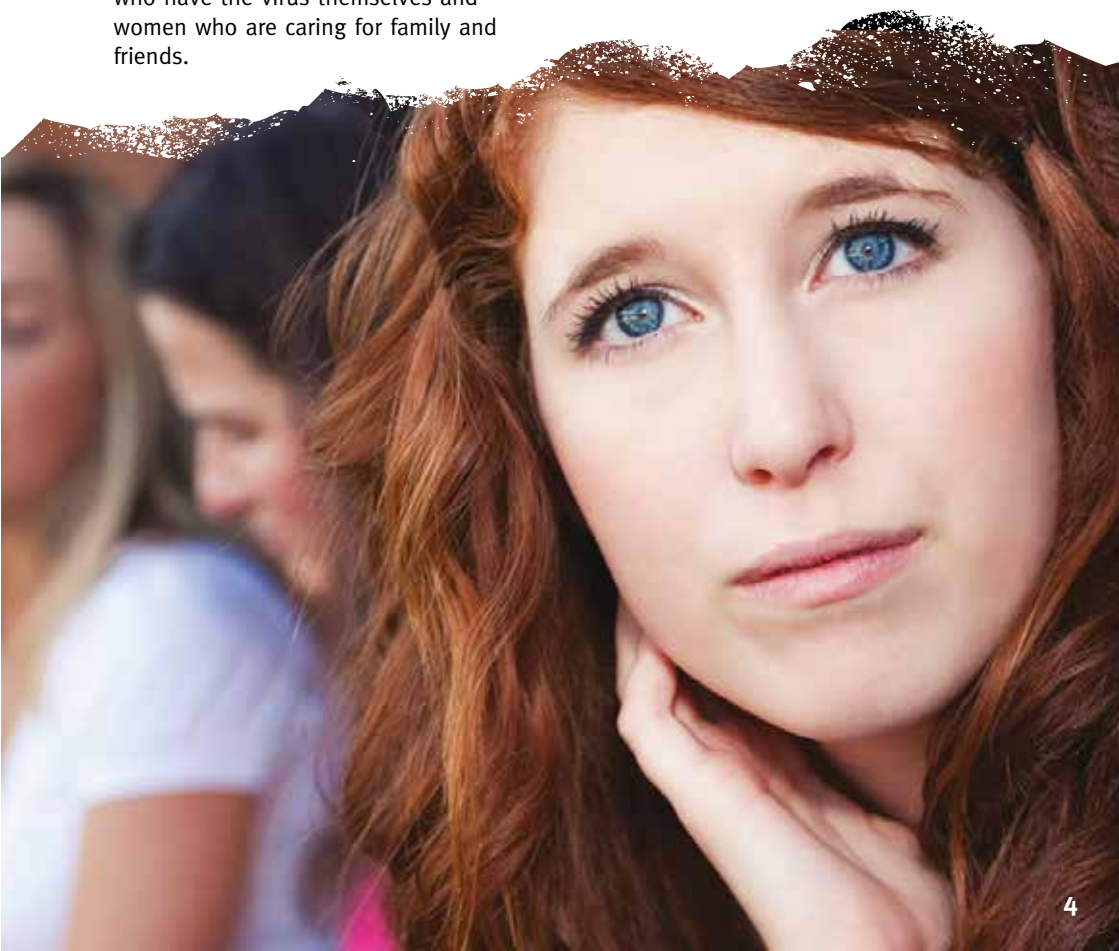
What does it mean if the test is positive?

Remember:

- With early diagnosis, treatment and healthcare, people living with HIV in the UK can now expect a relatively normal life expectancy.
- A positive result does not necessarily mean that someone will develop AIDS.
- An AIDS diagnosis does not necessarily mean someone will be sick all the time.
- You are not alone. Many women are living positively with HIV and AIDS – women who have the virus themselves and women who are caring for family and friends.

Women, HIV and pregnancy

There are a whole set of complex issues facing women who may want to become pregnant if they or their partner are HIV positive. Further information and advice is available from Positively UK, The Terrence Higgins Trust and the George House Trust (telephone numbers are listed overleaf).



Further information

The following organisations can be contacted for further information and advice:

AVERT (AIDS Education and Research Trust)

An organisation which carries out research and educational work concerning HIV and Aids.

First Floor South
6/7 Lovers Walk
Brighton
East Sussex BN1 6AH

Tel: 01273 947 749
(Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)
email: info@avert.org
web: www.avert.org

George House Trust

An organisation based in the North West giving advice, support and counselling to people living with HIV and AIDS. Specialist support and self help groups are also run for women, gay men, lesbians and drug users.

75-77 Ardwick Green North
Ardwick
Manchester M12 6FX

Helpline: 0161 274 4499
email: talk@ght.org.uk
web: www.ght.org.uk

National Aids Trust

A charity dedicated to changing society's response to HIV, championing the rights of people who live with HIV and campaigning for change.

web: www.nat.org.uk
www.hivaware.org.uk



Positively UK

An organisation that offers services specifically for women with HIV infection or AIDS, providing counselling, support and peer support services.

Tel: 020 7713 0444
(Mon – Fri 10am – 4pm)
email: info@positivelyuk.org
web: www.positivelyuk.org

Pozfem

A national network of women living with HIV in the UK, sharing experience, knowledge and information about living with HIV.

web: www.poz-fem.org.uk

SHE

The aim of the SHE programme is to build Strong, HIV positive, Empowered women through peer support sessions facilitated by women living with HIV.

web: www.shetoshe.org

Terrence Higgins Trust

An organisation which offers practical support, help, counselling and advice for anyone with or concerned about AIDS and HIV infection.

Helpline: 0808 802 1221
(Mon – Fri 10am – 8pm)
web: www.tht.org.uk

These organisations will be able to give you further information about local groups in your area.

HIV and AIDS in the workplace: A trade union issue

Trade unions have an important part to play in educating their members, in taking up workplace issues and in tackling discrimination. There have been cases where a worker's lifestyle or sexuality, or the assumptions made about them, have resulted in those workers being harassed and discriminated against. Our job as trade unionists is to ensure that prejudice and discrimination are resisted.

- Working with someone who has HIV or AIDS does not put you at risk. HIV is not spread through ordinary social and work contact. You cannot get it through shaking hands, by sharing cutlery or by sharing workplace facilities.
- HIV infection alone does not affect people's ability to do their job. There is no reason why someone who is HIV positive cannot continue to work normally unless they become very ill.
- There is no reason why employers should refuse to employ people, or sack anyone with HIV or AIDS. If you are dismissed because you are, or are suspected of being, HIV positive you may be able to claim unfair dismissal and direct disability discrimination. You should contact your Area Organiser straight away.
- Workers with HIV/AIDS are automatically protected by the Equality Act (EA). They have the right to ask for reasonable adjustments to be made to their workplace or working hours and employers are under a duty to make them. This makes combining work and living with HIV/AIDS easier to manage. The EA also protects HIV positive workers from discrimination and less favourable treatment. For more information about the EA, see Usdaw's *Supporting Disabled Members* (Lft 383).
- No one, including your employer, can force you to take a blood test for HIV. If this is suggested, contact your Union representative immediately.
- If you are HIV positive, you don't have to tell anyone at work. However, if you do inform your employer, you should insist that this information is treated in the strictest confidence.

Some people living with HIV/AIDS feel at ease about revealing their condition to friends and colleagues in their workplace. They believe that doing this makes it easier for them to deal with living with HIV/AIDS. They are also comfortable answering the questions from work colleagues on how it affects them on a day-to-day basis. However this is a matter of individual choice and no one should be forced into revealing their HIV status if they do not feel comfortable in doing so.

Advice and support on the best way to go about doing this is given by organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust and George House Trust. See page 5 for further information.
- If you are a 'first-aider' at work, you should carefully follow the basic hygiene procedures taught during first-aid training. This protects you against a range of infections, including HIV.
- The TUC have stressed the importance of employers adopting policies on HIV and AIDS which provide education and reduce discrimination – it is important that trade unions are part of this process.
- Trade unions have a role to play in negotiating facilities such as time off for the carers and partners of people with HIV or AIDS.
- There is also a need for political action to lobby to get more resources devoted to research into HIV and AIDS and into the care and support services and facilities which should be available to provide appropriate assistance.

Usdaw contacts

To find out more about the work of the Divisional Equalities Forums and Usdaw's equality work or about joining Usdaw contact:

South Wales and Western Division

Cardiff Office
Tel: 029 2073 1131
email: cardiff@usdaw.org.uk

Eastern Division

Waltham Cross Office
Tel: 01992 709280
email: walthamx@usdaw.org.uk

Midlands Division

Redditch Office
Tel: 01527 406290
email: redditch@usdaw.org.uk

North Eastern Division

Leeds Office
Tel: 0113 232 1320
email: leeds@usdaw.org.uk

Scottish Division

Glasgow Office
Tel: 0141 427 6561
email: glasgow@usdaw.org.uk

Southern Division

Morden Office
Tel: 020 8687 5950
email: morden@usdaw.org.uk

North West Division

Warrington Office
Tel: 01925 578050
email: warrington@usdaw.org.uk

Equalities Section

Usdaw
188 Wilmslow Road
Manchester M14 6LJ
Tel: 0161 224 2804
email: qualitymatters@usdaw.org.uk



Improving workers' lives –
Winning for members
www.usdaw.org.uk/equalities

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