

Knowing your status allows you to:

- take better care of yourself
- have more treatment options
- protect your partner by practicing safer sex
- tell your past sexual partners so they can be tested
- make informed decisions about your future

How do ARVs work?

ARVs (or antiretrovirals) are a group of drugs that slow down the reproduction rate of HIV. There are different types of ARVs and each type works to slow down HIV in a different way. When HIV is reproducing at a slower rate, the damage to your immune system is also slowed down, which helps your immune system to continue to function properly for a longer period of time. If your immune system is functioning properly you are less likely to become sick.

A patient diagnosed with HIV will not immediately start taking ARVs. It is only when the illness has progressed from HIV to AIDS that an individual will start taking ARVs. The progression from HIV to AIDS happens when a patient begins suffering from a serious AIDS-related illness or when the number of CD4-positive cells has dropped below a certain level (ask your doctor for the number/level used in your community).

ARVs will not remove HIV from a person's blood. They are a treatment for AIDS, not a cure. ARVs will help the immune system to become stronger, to slow the production of the virus and to improve the individual's health and prolong her/his life.

In order for ARV treatment to be effective, patients have to take several ARV's at once and at specific times of the day. Once ARV treatment has begun, it cannot be stopped. ARV's can cause side-effects such as headaches, diarrhea and tiredness.

Disclosing Your Status

Disclosing HIV positive status is difficult for every person. For women, this can be a particularly dangerous time. In many places, women who disclose their HIV status are at an increased risk for violence against them. This means that it is essential to never reveal or force women to reveal their results. They have to make this decision themselves.

Living Positively

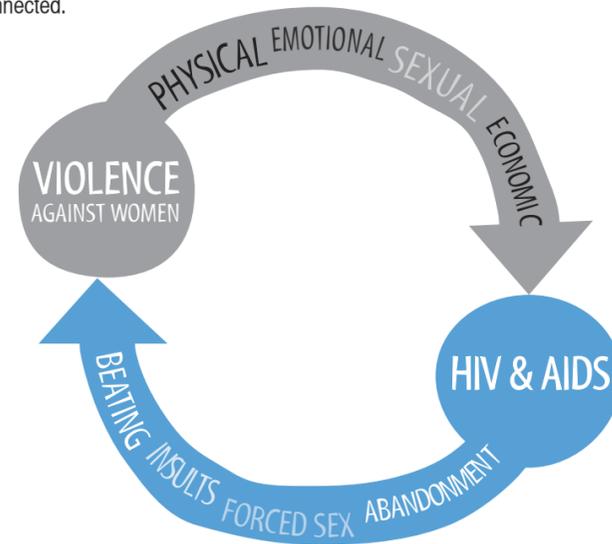
It is very challenging to receive an HIV positive test. Everyone will react to and handle her/his HIV positive status differently. Remember that many people are HIV positive, and they continue to live happy and healthy lives.

Key decisions that you may choose to talk about with a trusted friend or counselor include:

- Who might you tell about your status?
- How will you tell them?
- Who can encourage and support you?
- How can you learn more about the disease and how to avoid transmitting it to others?
- How can you stay healthy and take care of your body and mind?
- What are the treatment options in your area?
- Are there support groups or other associations where you could seek help?

The Connection between Violence against Women and HIV/AIDS

When girls and women lack power in their relationships, families and communities they are more vulnerable to violence and more vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. For many women, the violence they experience leads to HIV infection. For others, their HIV positive status brings violence, which can speed the onset of AIDS. Violence against women, HIV and AIDS are closely connected.



Violence against women is both cause and consequence of HIV and AIDS.

Get Involved!

SASA! is a movement in your community for preventing violence against women and HIV. It involves many community members working together for positive change.

To learn more about *SASA!* and how to get involved contact:

www.raisingvoices.org/sasa.php



HIV & AIDS

info sheet

Know the Basics

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for *Human Immunodeficiency Virus*. HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system, eventually making it too weak to protect the body from otherwise treatable illnesses. When a person is HIV positive and their immune system has become so weak that it succumbs to other illnesses it is called AIDS or *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. This is usually determined when the number of immune system cells in one's body drops below a certain point.

Through sex with an infected partner, including:	By practicing safer sex, including:
Vaginal sex	Using male or female condoms properly every time
Anal sex	Using male condoms properly every time
Oral sex	Using a condom on the penis during oral sex on a man Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex on a woman
From an infected mother to her child, including:	By avoiding exchange of fluids when possible and by providing treatment, including:
During pregnancy	Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of requiring the treatment; or, Following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection
During birth	Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of requiring the treatment; or, Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible
Through breast milk ¹	Taking a short course of ARV treatment for mother and baby may help reduce transmission. Maintaining consistent breast-feeding (i.e., not mixed feeding) during the first months of the baby's life reduces but does not eliminate risk Discontinuing breast-feeding as soon as baby can handle other sources of food Avoiding breast-feeding if the baby has sores in the mouth or if there are blisters or sores on the breast Formula feeding, ONLY if the family can afford it throughout AND safe water will be used each and every time
Through contact with infected blood, including:	By avoiding contact with others' blood, including:
Using old, used or non-sterile needles	Always using new needles
Blood-to-blood contact	Avoiding contact with others' blood when possible, or wearing gloves
Blood transfusions	(In most places now, blood is tested before transfusions happen, so this risk is low. Ask your hospital or health center for more information about their services)

¹UNICEF/UNAIDS/WHO/UNFPA. (2004). *HIV transmission through breastfeeding: A review of available evidence.*

Women's Special Vulnerability to HIV Infection

Biological

- The surface area of the vagina is greater than the surface area of the penis, so there is more exposure area.
- Unwanted sexual activity increases the risk of tears in the vagina, because the body is tense and dry.
- Young girls with underdeveloped bodies are at greater risk for injury and damage to their bodies during sex
- An untreated sexually transmitted infection (STI) can make an individual more likely to get and transmit HIV
- STIs often go unrecognized and untreated in women.

Social

- Unequal power relationships between women and men mean that many women are unable to make decisions about their bodies or sexuality that could protect them from infection.
- Social expectations or gender roles women are expected to play limit their access to information and choices about sex, sexuality, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS.
- Early marriage increases the risk for HIV, because many young girls are married to older men who have more sexual experience and are more likely to be HIV infected.
- Many girls and women are forced into transactional sex or sex work to meet their basic needs and those of their families.
- Social norms that accept male infidelity place women at risk.
- Young girls who are sexually abused often take part in high-risk sexual behaviors like having many partners and not using condoms.
- Dry sex or sex without women's natural lubrication increases the risk of tearing and abrasion in the vagina increasing the possibility of transmitting the virus.

HIV is not transmitted through:

- Mosquitoes
- Kissing, shaking hands or hugging
- Saliva
- Toilet seats
- Sharing cups, cutlery or dishes

What is the effect of HIV on the immune system?

Your immune system is your body's defense system against infections. HIV attacks specific cells (CD4-positive cells) in the immune system. When HIV enters these cells, they turn them into HIV factories, meaning that a person's own cells start producing the virus. This is a slow and gradual process; that is why there are no symptoms in the beginning. As time passes, the HIV weakens more and more cells of the immune system. If an HIV positive person is re-exposed to the HIV virus (by continuing to have unprotected sex with another HIV positive person, for example), they will be re-infected with HIV, which will further weaken their immune system. Eventually HIV weakens the immune system so much so that it is unable to protect the body.

HIV becomes AIDS when the virus has weakened the immune system so badly that other diseases and infections (TB, malaria, etc.) can enter easily, making the person sick. These diseases and infections are called AIDS-related illnesses. On average, a person who is healthy and who eats a balanced diet may be HIV positive for ten years before the virus progresses to AIDS. Eventually, without treatment, the body won't be able to fight off one of the AIDS-related illnesses and the individual will die.

It's important to remember that once an individual is HIV positive, she/he can transmit the virus to others—even though she/he looks healthy.

What are the symptoms of HIV and of AIDS?

A person with HIV does not have symptoms. She/he looks perfectly healthy. This means that it is impossible for you or your partner to know if either of you are infected. The only way to know if you or someone else is HIV positive is to have an HIV test.

AIDS symptoms are the symptoms related to whatever AIDS-related illness an individual contracts. If a person with AIDS is infected with TB, their symptoms will be the typical TB symptoms. The same is true for other AIDS-related illnesses, like malaria, pneumonia, and other infections.

Testing for HIV

The only sure way to know your HIV status is by going for HIV testing. When HIV enters a person's body, the body begins to produce a protein. These proteins are called antibodies. The HIV test is a simple blood test that will look for the presence of antibodies in your system.

The time between exposure to HIV and the detection of antibodies in the blood is called the "window period." This window period can be anywhere from 3 to 6 months. Therefore, if you test negative for HIV, it is important to be tested again after three months, and during those three months to make sure that you are not exposed in any way to the virus.

In many places now, the results of an HIV test are available that same day. A counselor will talk with you before and after testing. Although an HIV test can cause anxiety, it is often better to know one's status.