

# Positive Men

*Straight men don't catch HIV. Straight people living in the suburbs have a front door, a back door, a labrador and a commodore...not HIV. Matt*

## Home alone

HIV affects the largest sexually active group - straight men and women. You're not alone, there are other men like you living with the virus in Australia. So, no, it's not only gay men who get HIV! Some men are single, some are in a relationship with a woman, and some are married. Some positive men choose to remain outside of a close relationship. Many have said they have thrived and overcome obstacles that at first seemed overwhelming. However, whether you choose to live in a relationship or on your own it is important that you can meet and talk with other positive people and get support from services.

Are you worried that your love life is now a closed chapter? If you tell a woman you're HIV positive, will she walk away? Bigger still – is it okay to tell and feel that you've done the right thing? What do you say? Where do you look? How do you keep up the hope of finding a partner if you're single? Some men choose to hide their HIV from others, so you can decide what you want to do. It's your choice.

So what's the good news? There are positive men who have met someone to share their life with. Some have even become dads! There is a better future these days because there are new medical treatments to help positive people keep healthy. There are others who can help you make a new start.

*Being HIV positive has not been all bad. You need to be positive about the best that you have. Carlos*

*At first I thought my life had ended, but now I've got a girlfriend and a job and I make the most of every day. Danny*

*I've recently been diagnosed and want to keep healthy. Kris*

*Being an HIV positive dad is not much different because I do the same things that any father would do around their children. Mike*

## Love and the single guy

*I've lost track of how I feel about relationships. I don't think I'll ever be able to have another one. It would be a miracle for me to catch any bug...in other words I'm not scoring. Mohammed*

You may not go out with women or have sex because you think it's too hard to say how you became infected. Positive men have said that their top three concerns about this are trust, working out what to say and finding the right moment.

Some positive men said 'I think about rejection and lose confidence; I don't know how to approach her for a relationship; I want her but I'm scared of the risk involved; I'm scared that she'll walk away and I'm losing courage; I won't tell her because it's not her business; I think that I'll only attract a curiosity seeker and she'll treat with me with pity'.

## Saying how you got it

How do you increase your confidence to deal with awkward questions and situations when somebody is curious about how you got infected? You could suddenly face this question from a friend, a relative, someone you love, a work colleague, a health worker or even a member of the public. You can feel desperate as you use all your wits to protect yourself and the people you love from gossip.

When somebody wants to know how you got infected, always ask yourself:

### Who is asking me for this information?

You may decide to give some people more information than others. What you would tell your doctor may be different from what you tell a sexual partner, a friend or a work colleague. You will need to remember the story you tell to each person. Have set answers ready for those difficult questions.

### Why is this person asking this question?

Are they just being nosy? What do they really want to know?

### What can I say that will be a good answer for them?

Remember, not everybody wants the full story about how you got infected. Develop a comfortable story, working out what you want to say about your diagnosis if the person isn't going to be your friend or you don't like them.

## Enter soul mate - telling her

*I would disclose after a point. I don't know where that point is most of the time though. And that's one of the things that I think makes it difficult. Ricky*

Disclosing your HIV status to someone can be very difficult, especially if it's a new sexual partner. Fear of rejection runs deep and it can make you say to yourself, 'Why risk talking about my status at all with this person? It's not as though she can tell I have HIV by looking at me. I'll just practise safe sex and hope for the best.'

On the other hand, telling her you are HIV positive means she can enter the relationship with full knowledge. This way you can discuss safe sex instead of making up excuses for wearing a condom or for not having sex.

However finding the nerve and choosing the right words isn't easy. Once you tell her that you are positive you can't take it back. Be brave and expect some anger, shock or criticism. Some people will go silent for a while but they rarely walk away. Remember, the person who risks nothing, gains nothing.

Deciding when and how you tell is your choice. Here are a few helpful hints.

- Think ahead how you will describe things. Make time and space to talk.
- Keep it simple. Make it something easy for you to remember. Speak confidently. Don't make a big deal of it. One example is 'I know there's something special about you and me. I think I owe it to you to be honest about myself so we'll always feel safe together. I know we can trust each other, so I'm telling you something really personal about myself. I'm HIV positive.'
- When telling your partner, make it clear that she has the right to know that you're HIV positive. Your honesty about this can help to build trust between you.

- Telling her can be a good way of explaining why you have to use a condom. It's one way of saying you care about her and that she can know there is little or no risk because you always use condoms.
- Practice makes perfect. An HIV/AIDS counsellor can help you work out what you want to say and the best time to tell your story. This has worked well for others, so it's worth trying.
- Don't be the only one she can talk to about it. You can link her up with someone you trust, somebody who already knows you well and can answer any questions she may have. She may want to know something she doesn't want to ask you or tell you about.
- Give her the contact for your nearest HIV/AIDS counsellor or clinic. They will be only too happy to make an appointment for her and give her some help. Counselling is private and confidential. Counsellors and social workers often see new partners on their own. They help answer many questions about living in a relationship with an HIV positive person.
- Join an HIV support group.

Even if you intend to practise safe sex, as an HIV positive person you are required by law (Public Health Act 1991 in NSW) to tell any person of your HIV positive status and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs), before having sex with them. When the other person has been informed of the risk, they can voluntarily agree to accept the risk. This reflects the legal situation in NSW. Other states' Public Health Act need to be consulted.

## Dealing with rejection

Be prepared for rejection and don't take it personally. Remember it's okay for someone to say 'No' to you when you tell them you're HIV positive. We make judgments about people all the time. Just as you have the right to reject someone's friendship or sexual intimacy they have the right to say 'No' to you.

## The lowdown on condoms

A condom is a very thin latex (rubber) sheath that fits over the penis to catch cum before, during, and after you ejaculate. Wearing a condom is the best way to help prevent you from passing on the virus to a negative partner. Using a condom also



*Frank  
I can't find  
the right moment  
to tell.*



*Ricky  
I haven't  
worked out what  
to say yet.*



*Mohammed  
I can't work out  
if I can trust  
this person.*

protects you from becoming reinfected with other strains of HIV if you're having a sexual relationship with a partner who is also HIV positive.

Although nothing is 100% effective, condoms are very safe and reliable. They come in different sizes, colours and even flavours. Some are flared for a better fit while others have ribbing along the length for extra sensation. There are even condoms that are thinner than latex and are made from polyurethane. They are very strong and transfer body heat for even more stimulation. They are also good for those few people who are allergic to latex. Many HIV/AIDS clinics provide free condoms. Using a condom can also protect you and your partner from sexually transmitted infections.

## **Get it on!**

### **Saying I want to use a condom**

You should wear a condom to reduce the risk of transmitting infections. A new sex partner may ask 'why are you using a condom?' There are a number of possible replies.

- It makes me last longer. That's got to be good for you!
- Let's not risk it. You're too special.
- We'll be more relaxed. It's better for us.
- You can trust me without any worries.
- We can have good sex and stay healthy.
- I'm feeling hot and want to protect you - you can help me put it on.

## **What if the condom breaks?**

Accidents can happen - a condom can break or come off during sex, or you may forget to use one. This doesn't mean your partner will automatically get infected with HIV, but there is a risk. Taking PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis), the same sort of medication used to treat HIV positive men and women, for only a short period may give your partner's immune system time to clear up any possible infection. Your partner will have to take PEP immediately after having unprotected sex - within a few hours is best, but it must be no longer than 72 hours. If you're worried that you've exposed your partner to the HIV virus during sex, ring the 24 hour PEP Hotline on 1800 737 669.

## **Support - the odds are in your favour**

Okay, so you don't want HIV to take over your life. You want to stay connected to other people as much as possible and it's hard to travel this bumpy road alone. There are friendly support groups that give you the chance to meet new people. They know what you are going through. Other positive men and women will listen to you and tell you how they are finding new ways to come to terms with their HIV. You can make friends, relax and enjoy companionship and shared experiences. So take time out! Call Pozhet on 1800 812 404 for free, friendly, confidential support and a calendar of events that includes information sessions, country visits, social evenings and seaside retreats.