

Positive Women

I come first. There's so much that makes me who I am. I just happen to carry around this unwanted, unasked for virus. Saria

All walks of life

Positive women are from all walks of life. They are mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, wives and girlfriends of all ages, cultures and religions. Many positive women have children. Some live alone, others live in a relationship with a man or are married and some live with their family. Having unprotected sex with a boyfriend, partner or husband who was already infected with HIV gave most positive women this virus.

It takes time to deal with this thing called 'living with HIV'. HIV affects how we feel about ourselves both inside and out. As a woman living with HIV, you may be also caring for your children and family. On some days you may feel that there is no one to support you and that you have to deal with your secret alone.

In Australia, there are women who have been HIV positive for many years and are enjoying good health. They are leading full and happy lives, working, studying and enjoying friendships. Some are in relationships and may even have children. Some have chosen to remain single. With advances in treatments there is every reason for positive women to expect a long-term future. So it is important not to be completely overshadowed by HIV. There are many people who can help you. Here are some of the things other positive women have said.

Get on with your life and don't waste the time you have. Margaret

Remember there is somebody out there waiting to love you for who you are. Lily

HIV has to live with me, I'm not living with it. Julie

Speaking up

It is important that you have someone to talk with about being HIV positive. Telling is not easy. However, keeping a secret like HIV can lead to stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness, which is bad for your health. Many women find that their partners, family and close friends are very supportive. Talking to other positive women can also be helpful. It can be hard deciding who and when you should tell. This is a decision only you can make. When working out who to tell ask yourself:

- Can I trust this person?
- What am I going to gain by telling them?
- Can they keep this secret?

Sex and the man of your dreams

When I found out I had HIV I thought I'd never have sex again. I've been through a lot and now I have a beautiful relationship. I wish I'd had more hope when I first got diagnosed. Hannah

Can you still have sex? Absolutely! Anyone with HIV can have sex. Being positive may make you think that sex is too hard, especially if you are single. You'll be worried about transmitting the virus, you may find it too scary to tell a new partner that you're positive. Your sexual desire may change over time depending on your health or stress levels. HIV can also affect how you feel about yourself. You may worry about how your body looks. At times you may feel vulnerable and lack confidence. Learning to accept yourself as who you really are takes time and talking to other positive women can help.

So your biggest job may be regaining your confidence and convincing that special man and yourself that you can be around when he goes bald and grey. Go out and have fun! There are positive women who are enjoying sex and having happy, healthy relationships.

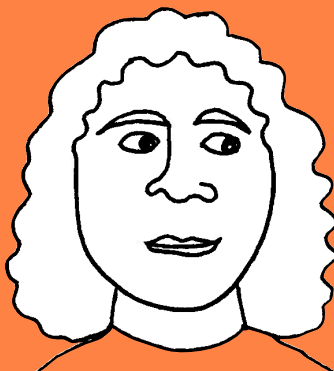
Telling him you're positive

Most positive women find that it's hard to know what to say when they meet someone that they want to have sex with. Some women try to make it as casual - especially if all they want is to have sex. They think that telling him straight away will scare him off and stop the chance of anything developing. Some like to wait for a while.

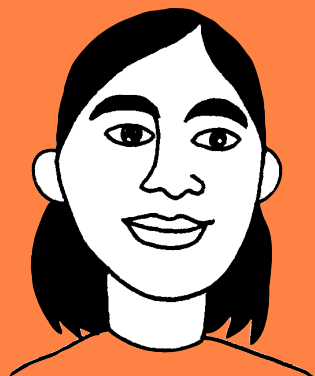
I tell a guy upfront. Boom! If he can deal with that he can deal with me. Ruby
I often tell a partner that they will be safer with me than with anyone else.
Jenny

The top three concerns about telling mentioned by positive women are not being sure if the person can be trusted, being nervous about his asking how you caught it and his prejudices about HIV/AIDS.

So when is the right time to tell? It is hard to know how he'll react. If he's the wrong type of man for you he'll simply make a quick exit. If he likes you he'll stay, but he'll still be confused and flipped out for a while. So there's never going to be a best time to tell. Each time is going to be different.



Elizabeth
I can't work out
if he can be trusted.



Iza
I'm scared that
he'll show me a lot of
prejudices.



Hannah
He'll want to know
how I caught it.

It's just as important for me to say what I like sexually as it is to let him know I'm HIV positive. Saria

I met someone I really fancy. I plucked up the courage to tell him I was HIV positive. He was cool about it and said it didn't matter. Julie

I was a little shy at first but since we've started talking it's brought us much closer together. We're more intimate and our sex life is better. Lily

I decided if I were HIV negative, I would still want this guy. Jenny

Having sex with him may not be easy sometimes. He will need to know that you will not infect him as long as you use condoms. It's also more difficult for you to infect him since HIV is less strong in vaginal fluids than in semen and blood.

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.

Dealing with rejection

If I don't tell, I worry and feel guilty even if we have safe sex it ends up not being worth it. I'd rather not have sex. Kim

Sometimes our fear that we will be rejected is greater than our fear of being alone. You don't have to be HIV positive to be rejected or have a bad relationship. Be prepared for rejection. Don't take it personally. Remember that it's okay for people to say 'No' to you, just as you have the right to say 'No' to them.

Make your first move - with a condom!

Are you worried about keeping sex safe? Australia's biggest condom manufacturer says that nearly as many women as men buy and carry condoms. This means that it won't be unusual for you to ask him to put one on. If he asks you why he has to wear a condom you could say:

- It only takes having sex once to get pregnant.
- You'll last longer wearing this.
- If you love me you'll want to protect me.
- I don't want to risk my future simply to prove that I love you.
- I like to have sex and I want us both to stay healthy.

Maybe baby? Pregnancy and children

Being HIV positive does not automatically mean that your baby will also have HIV. If you are a positive woman thinking about pregnancy, talk to other positive mums first...your kids often come first and you come second. Kim

Many women, when they are first told they have HIV, think that this means they will not be able to have children in the future. Around half of the women who are HIV positive in Australia are also mothers. Some of these women had children before they found out they were HIV positive, and some have started a family after learning that they were HIV positive.

With new treatments and better knowledge of the way that HIV works, it is now possible to start a family or have more children. There are a number of choices available for positive women and the partners of positive men.

If you are considering pregnancy, some good resources to start with are the FPA Health/ACON Women and HIV Fact Sheets and the Positive Pregnancy booklet published by the Sydney Children's Hospital. You will need to find a doctor who will support your decision to have a baby and it is useful to talk to other positive women about their experiences.

Stress less – get support

The women at my local support group are great. I can relax, be myself and listen to other positive women's wisdom and experience. Margaret

I have a few close friends who know. It makes all the difference. Saria

My mother and sister help me a lot. Iza

Many women say their greatest loss since becoming positive is their social life. They want to meet other positive women and positive men and be supported by others like themselves. Joining a support group and being social can make it easier for you to learn things. Other positive people know what you are talking about and going through. You'll make friends, relax and enjoy shared experiences. Support groups also respect your need for confidentiality. They're private and safe. So take time out!

Call Pozhet on 1800 812 404 for free, friendly confidential support and an annual calendar of activities.

**helping each other
helping ourselves**



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