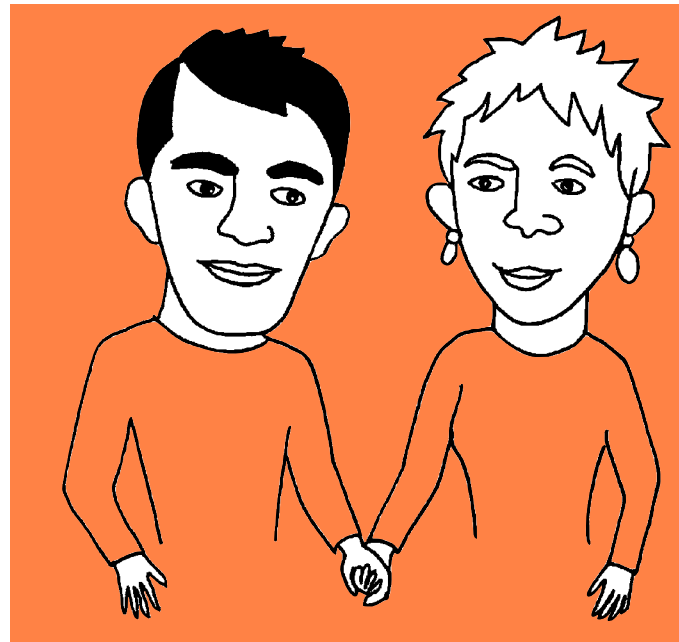


Couples

To love somebody

You can never guess who you're going to fall in love with. Many HIV negative men and women have relationships with HIV positive people. The medical term is serodiscordance - that's where one partner is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative. The term is a bit wordy so positive heterosexuals have coined their own word - 'pozneg'. In this pozneg world you may be a husband, wife, long-term partner, boyfriend, girlfriend or casual sex partner.

There are few straight pozneg couples that are public role models for others. Although they deal with the same problems that affect most 'normal' couples, there are issues around HIV that can have a huge impact on their health and daily life. It is often said that HIV is like having a third person in the relationship. There are many feelings and issues that will be faced by each partner individually and together. Here are some things that pozneg couples say they go through that may help you find your way.



*We're a positive and negative couple –
our relationship needs to be nurtured,
because that is all we've got.
Hannah*

Is telling make-or-break time?

*Until you can come out as a heterosexual couple with HIV, you are all things to each other, and that is way too much for any relationship to deal with.
Margaret*

*Telling can be a big issue if one partner wants to tell and the other does not.
Mike*

Some positive partners are afraid that their negative partner will tell other people, even a close friend, that they are HIV positive. This can become a difficult issue especially when the positive partner is ill. The negative partner may also be concerned about revealing their positive partner's HIV status, but sometimes they tell because they can no longer cope with the isolation and silence that comes from being unable to talk openly to anyone.

It's always useful, if you're a pozneg couple, to agree on who can be told and to think way ahead about all of this. Some of the questions you need to answer are:

Why do we want to tell them?

Why do we feel they want to know?

Will they think it's important enough to keep it to themselves?

What are the advantages and disadvantages for each of us?

Are either of us likely to regret that we have told?

Mentalk, womentalk - all about sex

The fear of passing on the virus stifled me when we had sex. Liz

How will I live with myself if I infect my partner? How can I put it out of my mind? John

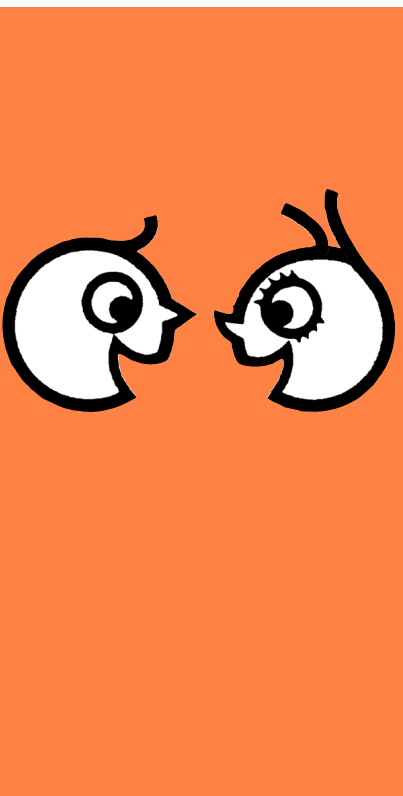
I don't want to pitch the poison dart, so we don't have much sex. Paul

Having sex and keeping sex alive are major issues for most pozneg couples.

Some positive partners struggle with fear and guilt around having regular sex with their negative partners. They may fear infecting their partner or may have no sexual desire at all due to periods of illness.

Negative partners may have mixed thoughts about having sex with their positive partner. They may feel rejected if their partner is not keen on having sex, and keep them at a distance. They may also be afraid of catching the virus. This is all part of living with HIV.

Here are questions often asked by pozneg couples:



Positive partner

Can we stay safe by using condoms?

Can we have any real sexual intimacy?

How will I live with myself if I infect my partner?

How do I know if my partner is getting tested regularly?

Would I rather my partner didn't get tested so that I can put it out of my mind?

Negative partner

How do I cope if my partner pressures me to have unsafe sex?

I might want unsafe sex too, but I'm scared of getting infected.

Is withdrawal safe?

If my partner has an undetectable viral load, do we still have to practise safe sex?

How can I ever relax when we're having sex?

How will I and everyone else cope if I get infected?

Should I think about leaving, or about not having sex any more?

Should I get tested more often?

It is important for both of you to know how you can get infected with HIV. Then you can decide together what sexual activities feel safe for you. This is about avoiding things that are too risky, and enjoying and exploring things which are safe, so that you can both relax and feel good about sex. Please read *Sex Matters A-Z, Sexual Health for Heterosexual Couples* to find out what kind of sex is safe.

Some pozneg couples find that talking with an HIV/AIDS counsellor, attending support groups and talking to others can help them learn better ways to have a healthy, active sex life.

What to do if the condom breaks?

Accidents can happen: a condom may break or come off during sex, or you could forget to use one. This doesn't mean a negative 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 a negative partner's immune system time to clear up any possible infection. You 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 been exposed to the HIV virus during sex, ring the 24 hour PEP Hotline on 1800 737 669.

Do we have to cover up and bunker down?

Stepping over the line is necessary if you want to start a pozneg relationship.
Carlos

It may be difficult for you as a couple to conceal that one of you needs regular medical appointments, takes medication or has poor health. It may be better to let close family members and friends know that there is HIV in your life together rather than dealing with the ongoing difficulties of keeping this from them.

But what if they know little or nothing about HIV and are struggling with their own anxieties? They might believe that someone they care about and are close to could die soon. They might worry about whether there is a risk of infection to them. If you're the negative partner they may even feel upset that you have chosen to have a close relationship with somebody who is HIV positive.

Make sure that you think carefully about when and how they learn from you that you are a couple living with HIV and that they get accurate information. This way there is every chance you won't have to keep them at a distance and miss out on an important source of support.

Ask your partner the following questions and then try to come to an agreement on the answers.

Positive partner

How do we enjoy life as a 'normal' couple?

Do we keep it secret or do we tell?

If we tell, will others see us as 'different'?

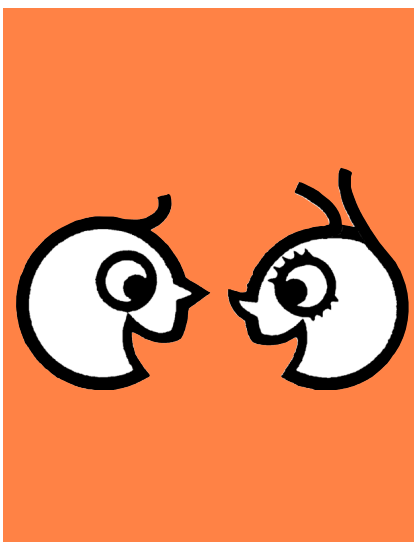
If we don't tell anyone, will we both end up feeling isolated because we are keeping this big secret?

Negative partner

Should I tell my friends or family that my partner is positive?

Will it be difficult for them to discuss this with me?

Will they know how to treat my positive partner?



Pozneg couples find peace of mind by protecting their HIV status in both their private and social life. In the heterosexual world, telling somebody outside of the home that one of you is HIV positive can be extremely difficult and very confronting.

In sickness and in health

It's only natural for you as a couple to feel anxious about the future. The positive partner may think 'How can I ask my partner to look after me if I am sick, when they've been so good to me? Who will look after me if they leave me?'

The negative partner often thinks 'How will I cope if they get sick? Who will look after and support me when so few people know about our situation? How will I bear being alone if they die?'

Each partner needs time to adjust to living with the virus. It takes practice to talk to each other openly about your feelings, especially about the future. Remember keeping silent is stressful. Talk over your anxieties with each other with love and caring. This will strengthen your relationship.

Getting support

My partner is the most isolated. Lets face it, as a positive man I have all the medical services at my feet, I've got somewhere to go. But my partner has very few places to go, if any. Mike

It's hard to know how people will react if you tell them that you're in a pozneg relationship. But it is important that you reach out and develop a good support network so that you can go and talk to someone about living with HIV, whether they are a family member, a friend, or a health worker. Having someone to talk to outside your relationship will take the pressure off both you and your partner, and will relieve some of the stress of keeping silent.

HIV/AIDS counsellors, social workers and other support workers can all help you to live better with HIV. Both positive and negative partners are welcome to use these services together, or separately.

Finally, there are couples enjoying successful long-term relationships. There's no good reason why an HIV positive person and an HIV negative person can't be in love, support each other and decide to make a go of it!

If you are a couple who are both HIV positive you can get advice from an HIV doctor or a counsellor on managing your sexual health and other treatments issues.

To meet other pozneg couples call Pozhet on Freecall (Aust) 1800 812 404.