HIV and relationships: Sexual relationships where one partner is HIV positive and one partner is HIV negative

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Sexual relationships between couples where one partner is HIV positive and one HIV negative can work as well as any relationship\(^{(1,2)}\). This leaflet aims to help keep both partners healthy.

This leaflet will cover:

- Telling your sexual partner that you are HIV positive
- How to prevent passing on HIV to your sexual partner
- How to get pregnant and start a family when one partner is HIV positive and one is HIV negative

**Telling your sexual partner that you are HIV positive**

This is often a great source of worry for someone with HIV. Telling your sexual partner that you are HIV positive can help your partner get tested, it allows you and your partner to use condoms to prevent passing on HIV, and can provide increased social support.\(^{(2,3)}\)

If you know you are HIV positive, and have unprotected sex without telling your partner that you are HIV positive, you will break the law if your partner becomes HIV infected and you may be charged with grievous bodily harm as the result.\(^{(2,4)}\)

When you tell your sexual partner that you are HIV positive you need to prepare yourself by:\(^{(5)}\)

1. Choosing a time when you will both be relaxed and have time to talk
2. Thinking through the ways your partner could react and how you would deal with them. Many will be understanding and offer the support and help that you need, unfortunately some may not be, and wish to end the sexual relationship. A plan to deal with such an event is important to your wellbeing
3. Considering your own safety if there is a history of violence in the relationship
Large studies looking at over 1000 patients, demonstrate that the number of relationships that breakup is no different when the patient has told their partner they are HIV positive compared to when they haven’t. Positive outcomes such as increased support were more common than negative outcomes in those patients where HIV status has been discussed\(^6\). You may wish to discuss the best way to inform your partner with our Health Advisers. They can also arrange for your partner to be have a rapid HIV test where result is available in 20 minutes. Please ask a nurse to direct you to our Health Advisers for more information.

**Preventing passing on HIV to your sexual partner**

**Barrier Protection (Condoms)**

Barrier contraception is the most effective way of preventing HIV transmission between partners. When condoms are used appropriately (for the entire duration of sex and every time sex takes place) they are very effective at reducing the risk of passing on HIV.\(^2,7\)

**Post-exposure prophylaxis\(^8\)**

If someone who is HIV negative is accidentally exposed to HIV through sex, for example when a condom splits, then many genitourinary (GUM) clinics or Accident and Emergency departments can provide a short course of HIV medication to clear the virus before the person becomes infected. This is called Post Exposure Prophylaxis following Sexual Exposure or PEPSE. This is not 100% effective and can be unpleasant to take. Prevention of exposure to HIV through the use of condoms is essential. If you are exposed to HIV then PEPSE needs to begin within 72 hours in order to be effective, and the sooner it is started the more effective it is. It is important to inform your partner and the doctor of your last HIV viral load count, and any anti-HIV treatment you take. Please note that there are strict indications for post exposure prophylaxis. After assessing all the information, the doctor may not deem it necessary for your partner to require post exposure prophylaxis.
Unprotected sexual practices and the risk of HIV transmission

Highest risk:
- Receptive anal intercourse (men and women)
- Receptive vaginal intercourse
- Insertive vaginal intercourse
- Insertive anal intercourse
- Receptive oral sex (men and women)

Lowest risk:
- Kissing, hugging, caressing and masturbation pose no risk of passing on HIV to sexual partners (unless there are open cuts or sores on the hands)

How to get pregnant and start a family when one partner is HIV positive and one is HIV negative

Many patients with HIV start families. If you are trying for a baby and either you or your partner is HIV negative, then ensuring that the virus is not passed on to the unaffected partner is important. How this is done depends on which partner is HIV positive.

If the female partner is HIV positive: The risk of passing on HIV can be avoided by collecting semen in a condom and inserting this into the woman’s vagina using a syringe. This can allow for the female partner to become pregnant and removes the risk of passing on HIV to the male partner, please discuss this with our Health Advisers for more information.

If the male partner is HIV positive: The risk of passing on HIV is higher when the male partner is infected.
There are a number of options to becoming pregnant and preventing passing on HIV:

**Sperm washing:** this is where the sperm are washed and then inserted into the woman. This reduces the risk of transmission of HIV and allows the woman to get pregnant. This is a new technique and not available everywhere. Discuss the availability of this option with your doctor.

**Sperm donor:** this is where sperm from another man without HIV is used instead of the male partner and inserted into the woman.

**Adoption:** If you are over 21 years old and can provide a permanent, stable and caring home, you can apply to adopt. www.direct.gov.uk has more information on applying to adopt.

**Natural conception**\(^{(10)}\): Can be attempted if the HIV infected partner is on HIV medication and taking it regularly, has had an undetectable viral load for the last 6 months, and is free of sexually transmitted infections. Unprotected sex at ovulation time in the woman’s menstrual cycle may be an alternative method of conception with a low risk of passing on HIV.\(^{(11)}\) **This method of getting pregnant carries the highest risk of passing on HIV to the uninfected partner.** The risk of passing on the virus MUST be discussed with your sexual partner before attempting to get pregnant in this manner. You should discuss this approach with your doctor before attempting natural conception.
For more information

Many GUM clinics will offer further advice on how to prevent the transmission of HIV in a sexual relationship. The UHB HIV service offers a wide range of specialist services to its patients on HIV and relationships.

These include:

- **Monthly Contraception Clinic**: (held on Monday mornings) which offers advice on preventing passing on HIV to sexual partners and information on getting pregnant and starting a family
- **Mental Health Support Services**: where a trained counsellor is available to discuss the issues raised in this leaflet and more
- **STI Screening Service**: offers screening for a full range of Sexually transmitted infections
- **Health Advisers**: offer a wide range of support for informing and testing your partner(s) and children
- **Social Worker**: offers social support through various voluntary peer support groups

Other sources of useful information include:

- Avert.org
- HIVaware.co.uk
- THT.org.uk
- University Hospitals Birmingham: www.uhb.nhs.uk/hiv.htm
- Base: www.i-base.info
- NAM: www.aidsmap.com

Contact the UHB HIV service using the contact information below or ask your doctor about how to access these specialist services.
Useful contacts

Contact number: 0121 371 6961
(24-hour telephone messaging line)

Email: appointmenthotline@uhb.nhs.uk

References


