



LIVING POSITIVELY:

YOUR ROADMAP TO LIVING WITH HIV

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We're here for you

Testing positive for HIV can be a life-changing experience. You may feel nervous, confused, scared or angry. Right now, the important thing for you to focus on is that you are not alone, and that you will be connected to people who will make sure you've got the resources, information and support you need to continue to live a healthy life.

Positive Force is your support team

If you were diagnosed at a San Francisco AIDS Foundation location, a Positive Force team member will contact you to talk about next steps.

We will assist you in connecting with HIV care and help you with other things you might be dealing with.

We can help you with things like:

- Working through your emotions around your diagnosis
- Finding a community of other people living with HIV
- Enrolling in health insurance and benefits
- Finding an HIV care provider and making an appointment
- Getting to your first medical appointment
- Supporting you as you start taking medications
- Figuring out when to share your HIV status, with whom, and how to share it
- Accessing emergency support services
- Talking through other things you're concerned about regarding your HIV status

The important thing to know right now is that we're here for you. Take a breath and be reassured that you can count on us to support you through the next steps.

Positive Force contact information

The Positive Force team can be reached at pf@sfaf.org and at (415) 602-9676. We are available most Mondays–Fridays, 9 am–5 pm.

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The test came back positive. Now what?

By Jimmy Gale, living with HIV since 2008

I tested positive when I was 24 years old. It came as a total surprise. I felt completely lost and couldn't focus. I was very much afraid of what the future held. I didn't know where to turn or what to do to stay strong.

It has now been more than ten years since my diagnosis, but I will always remember what I felt that day. If you've recently tested positive, here's my advice for what to do to stay calm and take care of yourself.

Slow Down.

While you may feel alone right now, remember that there are millions of people out there that know how you are feeling right now. Support and information are available to you when you are ready. Don't rush it. Go at your own pace.

Breathe.

You just received some life-changing news. Take time for yourself and allow yourself to fall apart if you need to. Take as much time as you need and be gentle with yourself. You have done nothing wrong.

Reach out for support.

Think of three people that have always had your back. Now is the time to lean on the people you love and trust. Even if you can only think of one person, sharing your burden will make it feel a little lighter.

Empower yourself.

Treatment options have never been better and incredible care is available. You will need to become a strong advocate for your own health and well-being. So do your research and educate yourself. Trust me... it makes all the difference in the world. You are stronger than you realize.

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Surround yourself with positive people.

Seek out folks that are living with HIV. There is something powerful that happens when we come together as a community. While our friends and family are there to support us, finding people that have gone through this will help you realize that you can (and will) get through this.

Keep moving forward.

Let's face it: This is a lot to take in. But it's important to remember how far we have come and how much better our options are. Medication and treatments continue to improve, research is teaching us incredible ways to live without fear, and every day we are getting closer to a cure. The most important advice that I can give you is to listen to your body and listen to your doctor. Take your medications and keep an eye on your lab results. You are going to be just fine... and we are here to support you on every step of your journey.

“ I hope my story can be one of hope. Living with HIV does not mean your life is over. ”

– Tiommi, HIV activist living with HIV since 2012

Taking care of yourself today

Tips on self-care

You have just received news that some people describe as life-changing. After being diagnosed with HIV, many people feel shaken to the core.

We want you to take care of yourself in this moment, and know that you will be OK.

If you can, take time to care for yourself today. For some people, that means talking to a close friend or a family member. For others, it may mean doing something relaxing—alone—like taking a bubble bath or going for a run to unwind.

Many people use drugs and alcohol as a way to cope. There are ways to reduce the harm to yourself that drugs and alcohol can cause. Here are a few ideas:

- Sometimes, sex goes along with drugs and alcohol. Remember that HIV is most likely to be transmitted by someone who has recently become HIV-positive. Unless your partner is using [PrEP](#) (page 31), using condoms and [being open with potential partners](#) (page 30) about your HIV status can make a huge difference in preventing the spread of HIV.
- If you go out drinking, prevent dehydration (and prevent a hangover) by drinking water throughout the night. Drink one glass of water for every beer/wine/shot/cocktail.
- If you use drugs, it can be helpful to watch your dosage. Start low and go slowly. You can always take more, but you can't take less after the fact. Some drugs may lead to dehydration and loss of appetite, so it can be very helpful to hydrate before, during and at the time you use drugs and to eat a healthy meal before you use.
- If you inject drugs, using clean and sterile drug injection equipment every time you inject is the most important way to protect yourself and others from infections.

What are ways that you de-stress and feel good about yourself? Take time to do something kind for yourself today.

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What to expect today and in the next week

In the next few days, here's what to expect.

HIV CARE

- You'll be speaking with a Positive Force Health Navigator who will help you decide next steps and make a plan.
- If you have had sex in the last 72 hours, you'll be able to speak with a nurse who can offer testing and [emergency PEP](#) (page 27) to your partner(s).
- You'll be contacted by Partner Services (LINCS in San Francisco). If you choose, they can help you notify any sex partners that may need to get tested.
- Schedule your first appointment with an HIV specialist to get labs drawn and discuss treatment options.

YOUR EMOTIONS

Over the next few days, you may feel overwhelmed. You may feel like you have done something wrong, or you may be angry. Be gentle with yourself. Remember, it's OK for you to take the time you need to process this news and make healthy plans for yourself.

Over the next few days, you might start thinking about [sharing your new diagnosis](#) (page 23) with people in your life. Remember, you don't have to share your status with everyone. Focus on the people that will help you heal and give you the support you need.

Text line and hotline after-hours support

If it is after-hours and you urgently need to speak with someone about HIV, how you're feeling, or want support, call the HIV Nightline. The agency that runs the hotline makes the service available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call (415) 434-2437 (local number) or 800-628-9240 (nationwide toll-free). You can also text their HIV text line with questions or concerns: (415) 200-2920.

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“ Treatment options have never been better and incredible care is available. You will need to become a strong advocate for your own health and well-being. So do your research and educate yourself. Trust me... it makes all the difference in the world. You are stronger than you realize. ”

– Jimmy, living with HIV since 2008

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HIV treatment

Should you start HIV medications right away?

The short answer is **yes**. Your health care provider will help you make the decision that is best for you, but generally, it's wise to start HIV medicine as soon as you can. Some situations can increase the urgency of starting HIV treatment, including having a very low CD4 cell count, being pregnant or having another serious health condition such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

Getting treated for HIV as early as possible is best for your health and the best way to prevent passing HIV to other people. This has been proven with very large clinical studies that have shown that people living with HIV reduce their risk of HIV-related illness and improve the health of their immune system by starting HIV medications as soon as they are diagnosed.

Many people feel relieved to start treatment, because it means they are taking care of themselves and their health.

What happens if you don't take HIV medications?

HIV is a virus that invades cells that are part of our immune system. Our immune system is our body's natural defense system against disease and infections. HIV takes over immune system cells (called CD4 cells or T-cells) and uses these cells to make copies of itself. Over time, and without HIV treatment, the virus makes thousands to millions of copies of itself in a person's body. These virus cells slowly destroy the immune system, leaving a person vulnerable to other infections and conditions.

What are HIV medications, and what do they do?

HIV medications are called antiretrovirals (ARVs). They are effective at keeping HIV under control, and preventing the virus from "replicating," or making copies of itself. The goal of antiretrovirals is to suppress the ability of the virus to replicate, lowering the presence of virus in your body to **"undetectable" levels.**

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Being undetectable means there are so few copies of the virus in your body that it can't be measured by standard viral load tests. **Studies have demonstrated that being undetectable (<200 copies/mL) for at least six months means you won't transmit HIV to others through sex.**

Being undetectable also means that the virus is less able to attack your immune system cells (CD4 or T-cells). If your immune system cells (CD4 or T-cells) are not under attack, they have a greater chance of fighting any other viruses, germs or other infections your body comes into contact with—which means you will be less likely to get sick.

Undetectable does not mean that the virus is gone from your body or that you are cured of HIV—being undetectable means that the virus is being kept at extremely low levels in your system by the medications.

When you are undetectable, you will still test positive for HIV. If you stop taking your medications, the levels of virus in your body will increase.

How do you get to be “undetectable”?

Most people living with HIV can get to be undetectable by taking their HIV medications every day for a period of time (usually one to six months) as prescribed by their health care provider. Most people can stay undetectable by continuing to take their HIV medications as prescribed by their health care provider. The provider who is managing your health and HIV can tell you more about what you can personally do to get and stay undetectable.

What treatments are available for HIV?

Today, most people starting medication for HIV only need to take one pill each day (as this single pill usually contains three or more HIV medications). There are multiple HIV medication options your health care provider may help you choose from, depending on factors specific to you and your health.

HIV medication selection can be complicated, but the important thing to know is that there are many options for treatment. Your health care provider will help you choose the best option for you based on your individual concerns.

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Why is it important to take HIV medications every day?

HIV is a resilient virus—it takes powerful medications taken regularly to keep it under control. Usually, people take a combination of three or more medications (often combined in one pill) every day to keep the virus from making copies of itself. When you miss doses of your medication, this gives the virus a chance to make copies of itself and limits the effectiveness of the medication in controlling the virus.

The virus can become resistant, or immune, to the medications you take. If the virus becomes resistant to the medications you take, switching to new medications may be necessary, and ultimately treatment options may become more limited.

Taking your medications every day is the best thing you can do to keep your virus levels in check and to prevent the virus from becoming resistant to the first-line medications that are easiest for you to take.

What about side effects?

These days, HIV medications are quite effective and the benefits of taking them outweigh the side effects, which are uncommon. In general, less than 10% of people starting HIV medications experience issues with their medications that require a change in medication.

After you start treatment, your health care provider will monitor your lab results to make sure the HIV medications are not adversely affecting your body in any important ways. Talk to your health care provider if you experience any symptoms or other problems with your medications at any point in your treatment.

Keep in mind that the key to your success in HIV treatment is the ability for you to take all your medication doses. If you are concerned about not being able to take your medication regularly, help is available. Talk to your health care provider, case manager or your Positive Force Health Navigator if you have questions or concerns.

“ It took me an entire year to say to my therapist, ‘I have HIV.’ Once I was able to come to terms with that, I was able to start moving forward. I was finding peace in my own spirit. I began to realize, I am valuable. I do matter. ”

– Esther, living with HIV since 2001

Getting and staying in HIV care

Finding an HIV specialist

Oftentimes, people living with HIV see infectious disease clinicians or other health care providers who specialize in treating people living with HIV. Increasingly, general practitioners are trained to care for people with HIV, with assistance from specialists as needed.

Your Positive Force Health Navigator will help you figure out who to see on a regular basis for your HIV care. They will also assist you in making your first appointment, answer any questions you have and provide other assistance as needed. If you are already part of a health care system, they will probably help you to contact the member services department to find an HIV specialist within your existing healthcare system.

Talking to your primary care health care provider about HIV

If you have a primary care provider or nurse practitioner, you will want to let them know about your new diagnosis. They will want to know about the new medications you're taking and the other health care you're receiving so they can best care for your health.

Here are some tips on sharing your HIV diagnosis with your health care provider:

- **Make a separate appointment** to talk to your regular health care provider about your diagnosis. Don't try to cram this in with other concerns or issues you have.
- **Bring your list of HIV medications** if they've been prescribed to you, or bring the bottles to your appointment.
- **Bring copies of your lab results** if they've been given to you.

What to bring to your first appointments

If needed, your Positive Force Health Navigator will help you sign up for health insurance and any other benefits you may be eligible for. They will help you gather the necessary documents you may need for this process and will make sure you have everything you need for your appointments.

Bring the following to your first appointment with your health care provider:

- A government-issued photo ID (driver's license, passport, green card, etc.)
- Insurance documents
- The name and contact information for your case workers or navigators
- List of medications and any lab results you have been provided
- Questions you may have about HIV or your care (write them down ahead of time)

The following documents MAY be needed at some point during your work with your Positive Force Health Navigator in order to access services and benefits, but they will let you know what is needed for sure:

- An ID (driver's license, passport, green card, etc.)
- Proof of income (pay stub, hire letter)
- Proof of residence (phone bill, credit card statement, or something else with your name and address on it)
- Lab results (showing your viral load and CD4 count)

We help people of any immigration status access services.

Ongoing HIV care appointments

After the initial appointments that happen when you're first diagnosed with HIV, you will likely settle into a routine of going to HIV care appointments every three or six months.

It's very important to attend all of your appointments so that your health care providers can find the best ways to manage your health, and make sure that your HIV medications are working well.

What to expect at ongoing HIV care appointments

Usually, your doctor or nurse practitioner will check in with you about a variety of things, like:

- **Issues related to your HIV medications**, including how regularly you've been taking them and if you're experiencing any side effects from them
- **How you're feeling emotionally**—if you've been sad or depressed, if you're sleeping normally and if your appetite is normal
- **If you're getting the social support you need** from other people including friends, family and partners
- **If you'd like any information** about the sexual transmission of HIV, ways to prevent passing HIV to other people, or other ways to care for your health and the health of your partners

Your doctor or nurse practitioner may also refer you to other types of health care providers depending on any other health conditions you have.

Your doctor might also ask if you'd like a referral to speak to a case manager or social worker. Case managers and social workers can help you access things like housing, food vouchers, alcohol and/or drug counseling and/or mental health treatment, etc.

Your health care provider will also take samples of your blood so that they can do [lab tests](#) (page 19)—more on this in the next section.

HIV care providers in San Francisco

Find the most recent list with contact information at www.Tiny.cc/HIVCareOptionsInSF

CLINICA ESPERANZA

240 Shotwell Street // (415) 552-3870

HEALTHRIGHT 360

1563 Mission Street // (415) 762-3700

KAISER PERMANENTE

2238 Geary Boulevard // (415) 833-2000

POSITIVE HEALTH PROGRAM AT WARD 86

995 Potrero Avenue // (415) 206-2400

SAN FRANCISCO CITY CLINIC

356 7th Street // (415) 487-5500

SAN FRANCISCO COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

726 Polk Street // (415) 292-3400

SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

various locations // (415) 364-7942

SISTER MARY PHILIPPA HEALTH CENTER

2235 Hayes Street // (415) 750-5500

UCSF 360 WELLNESS CENTER

350 Parnassus Avenue, Ste. 908 // (415) 353-2119

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

4150 Clement Street and 401 3rd Street // (415) 221-4810

“ At one point I had to get my lab work done every other month, but now I get it done three times a year. As my viral load has been undetectable for the last 15 years, I could probably go twice a year, but I still insist on three. After so many years, it has just become part of the routine. ”

– Vince, long-term survivor

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Lab tests during HIV care

About lab tests done in HIV care

Lab tests are an important part of your HIV care. Your health care provider will test your blood to make sure your HIV medications are working and aren't causing any problems for your health. They also test your blood to make sure you don't have any other infections that are associated with HIV.

Your HIV doctor or nurse will tell you what your test results mean for you, but here are a few things they will be following.

Tests to make sure your HIV medications are working

There are three blood tests that tell your health care provider how well your HIV medications are working to control HIV. The first is an **HIV viral load test**, which measures the amount of HIV found in a sample of your blood. The second is a **CD4 count**, which shows how many immune cells of this type are found in a sample of your blood. The third is the **CD4 percentage**, which shows the percentage of certain white blood cells that are CD4 cells.

VIRAL LOAD

A viral load test is used to check how well your HIV medications are controlling HIV by showing how much HIV is in a sample of your blood. If you've been recently diagnosed with HIV and haven't started HIV medications yet, your viral load might be very high.

If you have been taking HIV medications as prescribed, your viral load may be so low that it can't be detected by the HIV viral load test. If this is the case, your viral load is considered "undetectable." People who are just starting HIV treatment for the first time usually have their viral load gradually fall to an undetectable level within 4-24 weeks on treatment.

Lower viral loads are healthier than higher levels.

Your health care provider will likely perform a viral load test every three months.

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CD4 COUNT

Your CD4 (or T-cell) count is one measure of the health of your immune system. CD4 T-cells are white blood cells (part of your immune system) that help fight off infections. If you've recently been diagnosed with HIV, your CD4 count might be low. A person's CD4 count goes up after starting HIV medications, though the rate of increase varies. If you start treatment with a CD4 count below 200, it may take more time to reach higher CD4 counts.

Higher CD4 counts are healthier than lower CD4 counts. Your health care provider will probably do a CD4 count every three months.

CD4 PERCENTAGE

The CD4 percentage (CD4%) reflects the percentage of T-cells that are CD4 cells. The immune system contains many different types of cells, including CD4 and other types of T-cells. The CD4% gives health care providers an idea of the health of the immune system, especially when other factors may be affecting the absolute level of CD4 cells measured. The typical CD4% result can vary between 25%–65%.

Other general lab tests regularly performed in care

CBC (COMPLETE BLOOD COUNT)

A CBC test measures the levels of key cells in your blood, including red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

Red blood cells carry oxygen to other cells in your body. If you have low levels of red blood cells, you may feel fatigued (tired).

White blood cells are part of your immune system and help you fight infections. A high level can also indicate that the body is fighting an infection.

Platelets help your blood to clot (preventing bleeding). If you have low platelets, you may bleed more than usual, which can be dangerous.

CBC tests are usually done every three to six months.

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LIPID PROFILE

Lipid tests measure fatty substances in your blood, including cholesterol and triglycerides, which can increase your risk for heart disease. Lipid profiles are usually done at least once a year.

STI TESTS

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can occur in the throat, penis, vagina, and rectum (butt). The bacteria that causes syphilis and gonorrhea can also spread through the blood to other parts of your body. Some STIs are tested for by swabbing the potentially infected areas of the body (chlamydia and gonorrhea), and some are tested for with a blood test (syphilis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C).

People having sex may be tested anywhere from once every three months to once a year, depending on how frequently they are having sex. It's recommended that men having sex with men get tested for STIs every three months.

“ The support I received was overwhelming and empowering. I saw this incredible outpouring of love after I posted on Facebook about my status. ”

– Nick, diagnosed with HIV in 2015

Sharing your HIV status

About HIV disclosure

You might be worried about telling others that you're living with HIV. You might be scared or anxious about what people's reactions might be if you tell them.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about when, how and even IF you tell the people in your life that you are living with HIV. It is completely up to you and part of your own process of adjusting to your diagnosis.

Many people find that it's freeing to be open about their status with everyone in their life. We are fortunate to live in a time when many people living with HIV feel free to be open about their status, and find that others are supportive and understanding. Often people tell a select group of people and not others. Still others choose not to reveal their status to anyone. Ultimately, your health status is private and not anyone else's concern if you don't want it to be.

If you have recently been diagnosed with HIV, it might help to find one or more people in your life that you trust to talk to. Some people attend support groups in order to build confidence about disclosing their status. Other people find it's helpful to connect with other people living with HIV at the clinic they attend. But don't feel pressured to tell everyone or anyone right away. Do what feels right, and find understanding and non-judgmental people who will give you the support you need.

Possible pros and cons of disclosure

As you think about disclosure, consider the possible good things and possible downsides to disclosure.

Benefits of disclosure:

- **Emotional support** Having people you can talk to about what you are going through can be reassuring.
- **Stress relief** Revealing a closely-held issue to a trusted person can decrease anxiety and stress.

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- **Functional support** The people in your life may be able to help you remember clinic appointments or remember to take medications. They may even help by giving you rides to or accompanying you to your appointments.
- **Understanding** If someone you know is also living with HIV, telling them about your HIV status may result in them sharing how they have dealt with having HIV in their own lives.

There may also be possible downsides to disclosing your status to others. Some people do not understand things about HIV that might cause them to judge you, they might not understand that HIV is very treatable so they could be fearful for your health, or they simply may not know what to say. You should also consider any safety concerns you may have disclosing your status to specific people.

Tips on disclosing to family and friends

If you plan on disclosing your status to family or friends, there are a few things to consider beforehand:

- What's the best place for you to have a conversation about this? Do you want to meet at your place, at their place, or in a neutral public space? Is the place you pick private and safe?
- How might the person you tell react to your news? Are they likely to be understanding and supportive? If you think there's a chance they will be angry or upset with you, and not give you the support you need, is there a benefit to telling them?
- Think ahead of time if you're ready to answer questions the person might have. They might not know much about HIV and might have questions. You can always bring a list of resources, HIV website URLs or other information with you to give to the person you're meeting with if you think that might help you answer questions.

“ I kind of have a routine around disclosure. I have specific talking points. I even penned an “open letter to my future sex partners,” which I sometimes just link people to. For me, it’s easier to just put it out there. ”

– David, HIV activist and writer

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Support for partners who may have been exposed to HIV

You may be thinking about people you've had sex with or have shared injection drug equipment with that should get tested for HIV. You can have Partner Services at the San Francisco Department of Public Health notify them for you (you can remain anonymous) or you may choose to notify them directly yourself.

Partner Services can help notify partners

If you live in San Francisco, one of the first calls you will get after your diagnosis will be from Partner Services (or LINCS). This is an optional service that you can use to anonymously notify past sex partners that they might want to get an HIV test. Partner Services can help assist partners with making an HIV test appointment.

Partner Services is not mandatory. It is only available for people who have newly tested positive for HIV. Many people find that this way to anonymously notify past sex partners can help ease anxiety and reduce stress. If you live outside of San Francisco, partner notification services vary and may not be available.

Tips if you choose to disclose to partners who may have been exposed to HIV

You may also want to talk to past sex partners or people you've shared injection drug equipment with to notify them about being diagnosed with HIV. Talk to your Positive Force Health Navigator if you'd like help figuring out if you should or want to disclose, or want tips on how to disclose.

If you plan on disclosing to one or more sex partners or people you've shared injection drug use equipment with, there are a few things to consider beforehand:

- What's the best place for you to have a conversation about this? Do you want to meet at your place, at their place, or in a neutral public space? Is the place you pick private and safe?

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- Is there any risk that the person will be angry or violent? If there's risk of violence, keep in mind that a counselor can deliver the news for you.
- Be prepared for an unexpected response. Your partner may tell you that they are HIV-positive, too.
- Think ahead of time if you're ready to answer questions the person might have. They might not know much about HIV and might have questions about your health or HIV. You can always bring a list of resources, HIV website URLs or other information with you to give to the person you're meeting with if you think that might help you answer questions.

Emergency PEP

PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) is a 28-day course of pills that **HIV-negative people can take to prevent infection if they have been exposed to HIV**. PEP helps prevent HIV infection if the person starts the medications immediately (within 72 hours) after being potentially exposed to HIV. The sooner the start, the better.

People may go on PEP if they:

- Bottomed without a condom with someone who was either HIV-positive and not undetectable (see U=U, page 30) or whose status they didn't know
- Had the condom break
- Topped someone without a condom who was either HIV-positive and not undetectable (see U=U, page 30) or whose status they didn't know
- Were sexually assaulted
- Shared injection drug use equipment with someone

People who need access to PEP can get it at their hospital's emergency room. They also may be able to get PEP through their regular health care provider. People in San Francisco may also access PEP at Magnet by calling (415) 581-1600 before coming to the clinic. **If a partner needs access to PEP, they should not wait—every minute counts.**

“ Most of the people except my second partner were HIV-negative. It is totally possible to date and have healthy relationships when you are positive. I think that with honest, clear communication, any relationship can be successful, even if one or both are HIV-positive. ”

– Steven, San Franciscan living with HIV

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Sex, relationships and HIV

Your sex life

You can have a healthy and fulfilling sex life while living with HIV. Treatment and prevention options that are highly effective make it possible for many people to have the sex they want without worrying about HIV transmission.

- Some people living with HIV seek out other HIV-positive sex partners, but this may not be an option for you or what you decide to do.
- People who are living with HIV, taking their HIV medications as prescribed, and have a sustained undetectable viral load for at least six months do not transmit HIV to HIV-negative sex partners (see [U=U](#) on page 30).
- Additionally, if HIV-negative partners are taking PrEP as prescribed, they have a less than 1% chance of contracting HIV from an HIV-positive partner who is detectable (see [PrEP](#) on page 31; see [U=U](#) on page 30).
- Using condoms can also help prevent HIV and STI transmission.

Right now, know that you can have a great sex life with HIV. Take some time to learn more about how to prevent HIV transmission, and think through how you'll talk to future sex partners about HIV. If you have questions or concerns, talk to your Positive Force Health Navigator.

Do you know U=U?

U=U is a message started by Prevention Access Campaign about what it means to be “undetectable.”

U=U stands for “undetectable equals untransmittable.” In a nutshell, **people living with HIV who have an undetectable viral load (<200 copies/mL) for at least six months do not transmit HIV to other people through sex.**

Being undetectable means that the levels of HIV in your body are so low that they can't be measured by standard viral load tests. Usually, people who have been on HIV medications for at least six months and are adherent (take their medications daily as they are prescribed) get to undetectable. The only way to know if you are undetectable is from the results of a viral load test. Your health care provider will tell you if you are undetectable.

The U=U message is an important message that empowers people living with HIV to care for their health by getting to and remaining undetectable, and reduces HIV stigma by challenging the assumption that people living with HIV pose a “risk” to others during sex.

Sharing your HIV status with future sex partners

You might be worried about talking about your HIV status with new sex partners. If you'd like to talk through your options, or want tips on how to disclose your status, talk to your Positive Force Health Navigator.

Although sharing your HIV status is always a personal choice, there are unfortunately many states that have laws against non-disclosure of HIV status to a sex partner. Although rare, and difficult to prove, it is possible for non-disclosure to result in criminal penalty under criminalization laws that exist in some states outside of California. These laws are unfair for many reasons. In California, people living with HIV are not required to disclose their HIV status to a potential sex partner. If you want to read more about HIV criminalization laws, visit [The Center for HIV Law and Policy](#) online.

If you want to discuss your HIV status with potential partners, here are some tips:

- If you're on an app, have the conversation or bring up that you're HIV-positive before meeting in person
- Have your talking points ready (e.g., "I'm undetectable, which means that my viral load is so low that I won't transmit HIV to other people.")
- Know ahead of time what you're comfortable and not comfortable doing (e.g., using a condom, topping)
- Be ready to answer questions that may come up about HIV ("HIV isn't a death sentence anymore—in fact, people who take care of themselves live long and healthy lives.")
- If you are going to disclose to someone in person, make sure you choose a space that will be most comfortable for you (public, private, etc.) and a time where you and the other person will not be rushed.

PrEP for HIV-negative partners

Once you are maintaining an undetectable viral load (<200 copies/mL) for at least six months, you cannot transmit HIV to a sexual partner. In the meantime, your HIV-negative partners might want to consider taking PrEP as an extra precaution. PrEP stands for "pre-exposure prophylaxis" and is an effective way to prevent HIV. PrEP plays an important role for many people in serodiscordant (mixed HIV status) relationships. With PrEP, the HIV-negative partner takes a medication to stay HIV-negative.

PrEP is effective and can reduce risk of HIV infection by up to 99% when used as directed. When combined with other HIV risk reduction strategies, like condoms and undetectable status of any HIV-positive partners, there is even greater protection.

To find the latest information about PrEP and see where someone in your life might go to access it, visit sfaf.org/prep or pleaseprepmo.org.

“ Take your medications, they will save you the difficulties of previous times. Remember, undetectable = untransmittable. Face your new life with hope and assuredness that you will live long and healthily as will those you encounter with the same diagnoses, IF you remain compliant with the medications and maintain a healthy, heart-guided attitude. You’ll live long. Enjoy it and share your joy. ”

– Harry, diagnosed with HIV in 1980

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The weeks and years ahead

Living well

Many health tips for people living with HIV are the same as those for people who are HIV-negative. When living with HIV, taking care of your immune system is of utmost importance. This includes lowering stress and adopting healthy lifestyle choices related to diet, exercise and sleep, for instance.

EAT HEALTHY, BALANCED MEALS

We're surrounded by food options that may taste delicious but lack nutrients our bodies need (or have too much fat, salt or sugar in them). Healthy diets can include fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, nuts and eggs, and low-fat dairy products.

Your health care provider will be able to put you in touch with a dietician if you'd like help managing your weight, changing your eating habits, or learning what to eat in order to maintain your health.

EXERCISE REGULARLY

Being active is an important way to maintain health for everybody, including people living with HIV. Exercise helps relieve stress, maintain a healthy body weight, builds muscle, keeps your bones strong, burns fat and keeps your heart healthy. Aim to exercise for 30 minutes a day, five times a week.

REDUCE HARMS FROM ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Drinking too much or taking drugs can weaken your immune system, which may cause you to experience more sickness. Recreational drugs can also cause your viral load to increase, particularly by interfering with your ability to take all of your medication doses. If you want to make changes to your drug or alcohol use (including reducing or stopping your use altogether), talk to your health care provider, who will be able to help you find resources and support to make changes.

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Many people choose to use alcohol and other drugs for a variety of reasons. If you do choose to use alcohol or drugs, know that there are things you can do to reduce or prevent their negative impact.

Harm reduction tips include:

- Buying less so you use less
- Setting a time limit before you start (e.g., “I’m going to stop drinking tonight at 10 pm”)
- Eating a meal before you use or drink
- Lowering your dosage and frequency
- Choosing the least harmful method of use (e.g., smoking can be safer than injecting)

STOP SMOKING

If you smoke cigarettes, one of the most important things you can do for your health is to quit smoking. People living with HIV who smoke cigarettes have a higher risk of lung cancer, head and neck cancers, and cervical and anal cancers. They’re more likely to get Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), heart disease and pneumonia. On average, they have shorter lifespans and worse HIV-outcomes than people living with HIV who do not smoke. There is a lot of support available for people who want to quit smoking. Even reducing the amount you smoke can have a positive impact on your health. Talk to your health care provider for more information.

GET EIGHT HOURS OF SLEEP EVERY NIGHT

Getting a good night’s sleep is important to overall health and wellbeing. Reducing stress and anxiety and avoiding caffeine and alcohol can help you sleep better.

MANAGE YOUR STRESS

Mental health is an important part of overall health. Having a healthy support system—of friends, family, and other loved ones—can go a long way in helping you reduce the stress in your life and stay healthy and well.

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Many people manage stress by getting enough sleep at night, attending support groups and making time for enjoyable activities and hobbies.

There are many [groups and services](#) (page 35) at San Francisco AIDS Foundation that can assist you in taking care of yourself. Your Positive Force Health Navigator will assist you in finding the program(s) and services that best meet your needs and linking you to those services.

Prognosis

Many people wonder about their life expectancy after being diagnosed with HIV. The good news is that with effective HIV treatment, **the life expectancy of people living with HIV is near to that of HIV-negative people**. And, there are many options for antiretroviral medications that are less toxic and have fewer side effects than ever before.

The bottom line is that people living with HIV who stay in care, take their medications as prescribed and take good care of their health can live for many healthy years with HIV.

New therapies and cure research

New HIV medications and ways to take these medications are being developed. Some of the medications that are being studied don't need to be taken every day, such as injections that are given once a month or once every other month. There are also treatments currently being studied that keep HIV in "remission." While these treatments that are being developed are not a cure, if successful, they would keep HIV suppressed and inactive for long periods of time. San Francisco AIDS Foundation will share news of these medications if they are found to be effective.

Scientists all over the world are working on finding an HIV cure, but it still may be years away. As we wait for an HIV cure, the best thing we can do is keep ourselves healthy so that we're ready when a cure is discovered.

Groups and services at San Francisco AIDS Foundation

MEDICAL AND HEALTH SERVICES

POSITIVE FORCE

pforce@sfaf.org // (415) 602-9676

- Linkage to HIV medical care
- Health insurance and benefits enrollment assistance
- Education/support groups
- Short-term case management
- One-on-one wellness sessions
- Seminars on living with HIV
- Social outings and events
- Access to emergency support services

HEPATITIS C TESTING, TREATMENT AND SUPPORT

Testing: (415) 487-8037 // Treatment and Support: (415) 487-8044

MAGNET CLINIC

470 Castro Street // (415) 581-1600 // strutsf.org

- Sexual health screenings—testing/diagnosis or treatment for syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, vaginitis, pregnancy, herpes, genital warts, anal fissures, yeast infections, trichomoniasis, bacterial vaginosis
- Hepatitis A and B vaccinations
- Hepatitis C testing & referral to treatment
- Meningitis vaccinations
- Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)
- Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) — **call (415) 437-3450**

THE STONEWALL PROJECT

stonewallsf.org // (415) 487-3100

- Substance use treatment and counseling
- Walk-in services and a structured enrolled program for gay, bi and trans men interested in addressing their substance use
- All goals are supported and welcome

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SOCIAL AND SUPPORT GROUPS

BLACK BROTHERS ESTEEM (BBE)

sfaf.org/client-services/black-brothers-esteem // (415) 487-8018

Prevention and support program empowering African American and Black men who are gay, bisexual, trans, same gender loving or affected by HIV

BRIDGEMEN

bridgemen.org // meetup.com/Bridgemen

Community-building and volunteer program for gay, bisexual, trans and queer men

THE DREAAM PROJECT

sfaf.org/client-services/dream-project // (415) 487-8039

DREAAM (Determined to Respect and Encourage African American Men) is a social group for young African American and Black men who are gay, bi, trans, queer age 30 and under

ELIZABETH TAYLOR 50-PLUS NETWORK

meetup.com/50-Plus-Network

Wellness and social group for HIV-negative and HIV-positive gay, bi and trans men who are 50 years and older

PROGRAMA LATINO / LATINO PROGRAMS

sfaf.org/client-services/latino-programs // (415) 487-8034

Social and support group for Spanish-speaking folks living with or affected by HIV

TRANSLIFE

sfaf.org/client-services/translife // (415) 487-3062

Social and support group for trans, gender variant and gender queer people who are both HIV-positive and HIV-negative

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