

## HIV & AIDS in Women

- Treatments for HIV and AIDS
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- Questions to Ask

## HIV & AIDS in Women

It's been a quarter of a century since the world first heard the acronyms "HIV" and "AIDS." Since then, this terrible epidemic has spread to every corner of the world and shown itself to be far more than a disease of homosexual men. In fact, today the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is increasingly feminine, with half of all AIDS cases worldwide occurring in women.

### Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. What is your experience treating HIV-positive patients? Do you have specialized training in this area?
2. How soon should I begin treatment for AIDS? What are the pros and cons of starting drug therapy early in the course of infection?
3. What are the main side effects of antiviral drugs?
4. Once I start treatment do I have to continue taking the drugs for the rest of my life?
5. What is the amount of virus in my blood (viral load) and my CD4 count, and what do those numbers tell me about my illness?
6. Are there alternative therapies I can consider instead of or in addition to the powerful new drugs?
7. What are the chances of my sexual partner becoming infected if we use condoms?
8. I'd like to have a baby. Can I, if I'm HIV-positive?
9. How does HIV infection affect my risk for developing infections and other complications?
10. How can I keep up with new advances in fighting HIV infection and its complications? Where can I find support?

### Prevalence of AIDS in Women

In the United States, more than a quarter (27 percent) of those with AIDS are women, compared to just seven percent in 1985, so chances are you might know a woman with HIV or AIDS.

Most infected women are young and black, with African-American women accounting for nearly six out of 10 AIDS cases in women in the U.S. Hispanic women come next, making up about 20 percent of women with AIDS, while Caucasian women account for 16.8 percent.

### Why Women?

One reason for the increase of HIV and AIDS in women is that it's easier for women to be infected with the virus than men. For instance, women are more vulnerable to rape and to having unprotected sex. They're also more likely to have another sexually transmitted infection, like chlamydia, that increases their risk of HIV infection. Additionally, studies find that women are more vulnerable to HIV infection during and after pregnancy.

And if you have an adolescent daughter, you should know that she's particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. That may be due to the tiny tears that can occur in young girls' genital tracts during intercourse, which provide a prime opportunity for the virus to enter.

Also, teenaged girls' immature genital

tracts provide more exposure for the virus, and girls are more likely to engage in high-risk activities such as having unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners. Finally, it's sometimes more difficult for adolescent girls to convince their partners to use condoms.

### Treatments for HIV and AIDS

If you're infected with HIV, it's very important that you seek treatment from a qualified specialist, usually an infectious disease doctor who specializes in HIV and AIDS. This disease is too complex to be managed by a primary care doctor.

Unfortunately, studies find that women are less likely to seek care than men, often because they just don't make the time or effort to take care of themselves, because they're so busy taking care of everyone else.

Don't ignore your own health! Today there are more than 25 drugs available to treat HIV. Some come in combination doses, so instead of the 10 to 12 pills you might have had to take years ago, you may only have to take one or two a day. With treatment, studies find, you can not only significantly reduce the amount of virus in your system and prevent secondary infections, but you can also reduce the risk of transmission to others.

If you live near a major academic center, it will likely have an AIDS clinic that not only offers medical care, but has support groups, therapy and assistance with accessing government programs to help pay for your treatment.

But don't wait before starting therapy. Researchers find that the disease seems to get worse faster in women, at least

## Resources

### The Body.com

[www.thebody.com](http://www.thebody.com)  
Offers bulletin boards, breaking news, research information and other content on HIV and AIDS. Its mission is to use the Web to lower barriers between patients and clinicians, demystify HIV/AIDS and its treatment, improve patients' quality of life and foster community through human connection.

### U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

1-800-232-4636  
[www.cdc.gov/hiv](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv)  
Provides information about the prevalence of HIV and AIDS as well as consumer resources for HIV awareness, diagnosis and treatment.

### National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases

301-496-5717  
[www.niaid.nih.gov](http://www.niaid.nih.gov)  
Part of the government-funded National Institutes of Health. Provides consumer information on the virus, treatment, research and clinical trials.

### The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA)

[www.womenandaids.unaids.org](http://www.womenandaids.unaids.org)  
A worldwide alliance of civil society groups, networks of women with HIV and AIDS, governments and United Nations organizations that works to highlight the impact of AIDS on women and girls and mobilize actions to enable them to protect themselves from HIV and receive the care and support they need.

during the first five years after infection, even if women have lower levels of the virus than men.

And while all HIV medications have side effects, those effects vary from person to person. It is possible, however, that you may experience more frequent and severe side effects than would a man taking the drugs, including diarrhea, nausea, nerve damage, kidney stones and pancreatitis.

Don't just suffer with these conditions. Talk to your doctor or other health care professionals where you're being treated about options to help you better manage the side effects. For instance, there are very good medications available that can prevent nausea. Keep in mind that many side effects fade once your body adjusts to the drugs.

## Practicing Safe Sex

Hopefully, someday there will be a vaccine or other way of protecting everyone against transmission of the virus, but until then, protection is up to you.

So whether you're HIV-positive or not, the most important thing you can do is use a condom during sex—any kind of sex. If your partner won't use a condom, you can use a female condom, also available in drugstores. Or you can refuse to have sex.

If you're engaging in oral sex, you still need protection, because the virus can be transmitted through tiny sores in the mouth. Men should still wear condoms, and women should use dental dams or

cut-open condoms in their mouths to create a barrier. You can even use plastic food wrap as a barrier during oral sex with a woman or as an added protection during oral sex with a man.

If you feel helpless when it comes to insisting that your partner use condoms, talk to your health care professional. He or she can help you learn ways to convince your partner to use condoms or help you find other, safer ways of being intimate.

## HIV, Pregnancy & Breastfeeding

Every year about 6,000 to 7,000 HIV-infected women give birth in the U.S. Most of those pregnancies are unplanned. But that doesn't mean they have to be unsafe. If you suspect you're pregnant and don't know if you're HIV infected, ask for a test. Most doctors automatically test pregnant women for the HIV virus.

If you're infected, don't panic. Today, pregnant women treated with HIV drugs have very little risk of transferring the virus to their babies. You can further reduce the risk by having a cesarean section instead of a vaginal birth. But if you don't get treatment during pregnancy—even late in pregnancy—you have a one in four chance of passing the virus to your baby.

Once the baby is born, it's time to bottle-feed. As much as you might want to breastfeed, you can't, because breastfeeding can transmit the virus to your babies.

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