

Factsheet Information for people recently diagnosed with HIV

Key points

- With the right treatment and care people with HIV live long and healthy lives.
- You may experience many different emotions when you first find out you have HIV.
- HIV treatment will reduce the level of HIV in your body and slow down damage to your immune system.



Finding out that you have HIV can be a life-changing experience. You might find it hard to appreciate it at the time, but it is good that you've found out you have HIV. Put simply, finding out that you have HIV could save your life.

This is because you will now have the opportunity to have regular check-ups to monitor your HIV. Doctors and other skilled staff will be able to provide you with the care you need, including HIV treatment and medicines to prevent other illnesses and infections.

It is worth knowing that with the right treatment and care people with HIV are living long and healthy lives (see the factsheet [Prognosis](#) for more information).

The time of your diagnosis can be a difficult time to make decisions. Such decisions might include [starting HIV treatment](#) or [telling close friends and family about your diagnosis](#).

Finding support

You may experience lots of different emotions when you first find out you have HIV and it is important to know that you don't have to deal with your diagnosis on your own. Family and friends can be a really valuable source of support, but if you don't feel ready to tell the people closest to you, there are other ways of finding support.

In the UK, there are two national helplines that can provide valuable support and information after you've been diagnosed with HIV.

They are:

- Sexual Health Line, 0800 567 123 (funded by the Department of Health)
- THT Direct, 0808 802 1221 (run by the UK's largest HIV charity, the Terrence Higgins Trust: www.tht.org.uk).

In addition to the support available through the NHS, such as through your GP or HIV clinic, there are charities that offer various support services, like information, advice, counselling and peer support. To find out what's available in your area, you could search our online e-atlas (www.aidsmap.com/e-atlas), call THT Direct, or ask your doctor.

For online support, including counselling and peer support through discussion forums, you may find THT's MyHIV website helpful. You can find it at www.myhiv.org.uk.

Treatment

HIV is a virus that attacks the body's defence against infection and illness – the immune system. But you can take drugs to reduce the level of HIV in your body and to slow down or prevent damage to your immune system. These drugs are not a cure, but they can help you stay well and help you to lead a longer and healthier life. They can also help prevent you from passing HIV on to someone else.

Everyone who has diagnosed HIV is recommended to take HIV treatment. Nonetheless the decision to do so is yours. Before starting treatment, it's important that you understand how it works and what it involves. You may need a little time before you feel ready to start.

You will not have to make any decisions about treatment on the day of your diagnosis. It is likely that you will be given an appointment to come back and see a specialist HIV doctor in the next few days or weeks when you'll be able to talk through your options.

Medical care

It's very important that you have regular check-ups, even if you choose not to start HIV treatment now. This may mean going to your HIV clinic every three to six months. If you are unwell, or are [starting HIV treatment](#), you'll need more regular appointments. At these appointments you will be asked how you are feeling, if you have any symptoms, and you'll have blood tests. This will give both [you and your doctor](#) a better understanding of how your body is coping with HIV.

On the day of your diagnosis, a follow-up appointment should have been made for you with a specialist HIV doctor. If this wasn't done and you need to find a specialist HIV clinic, THT Direct can help you find one, or you could search for one using our online [e-atlas](#).

"Everyone who has diagnosed HIV is recommended to take HIV treatment."

In the UK, you don't have to go to the same clinic where you were diagnosed. In fact, you can go to any HIV clinic in the country. It's important that you feel comfortable at the clinic you go to. Some people prefer larger clinics, others like smaller, less busy ones.

There are two key tests to monitor HIV. A [CD4 cell count](#) measures the number of key CD4 immune system cells in a small amount of blood. The other key test is called a [viral load](#) test, and this measures how active HIV is in your body. You'll also have other tests to check on your [heart](#), [liver](#) and [kidneys](#).

Telling people you have HIV

Take time to think about who you are going to [tell that you have HIV](#). Also think about how you are going to do it and what sort of support you'd like them to give. Can you anticipate what a person's best, worst or most likely reaction will be?

You might want to begin by telling people you trust most, or who are closest to you (partner, family, or trusted friends, for example) and who you think will be the most supportive.

If you've been infected very recently

Some people are diagnosed with HIV soon after they are infected with the virus. The first few weeks after infection with HIV is called [primary HIV infection](#), or acute HIV infection. Some people experience an illness that includes a high temperature, swollen glands, sore throat and rash.

HIV viral load is very high at this time and people with primary infection are very infectious. Safer sex is particularly important to reduce the risk of passing on HIV to others.

You can find out more about this in our short illustrated leaflet [Very recent infection](#).

Getting more information

Ask questions at [your clinic](#) if there is anything you don't understand. The chances are that they will be supportive and helpful.

NAM also produces a website with comprehensive information about HIV called www.aidsmap.com where you can find lots of [information resources](#) and you can sign up for [free email news bulletins](#). It also includes first-hand accounts from people living with HIV, in a section called *In your own words*.

Find out more

Your next steps Information booklets

Starting HIV treatment Simple factsheet

Talking points Online, interactive tool