

DECIDING IF, WHEN & HOW TO DISCLOSE YOUR HIV STATUS

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV HAVE THE RIGHT TO DECIDE IF, WHEN, AND HOW THEY TELL OTHERS ABOUT THEIR HIV STATUS

Sharing your HIV status is called disclosure. Your decision about whether to disclose may change with different people and situations.

Safer sex is a shared responsibility. When you share your HIV status, you and your partner(s) can work together to make your sex life pleasurable and safe! Many young people who are living with HIV or have a partner who is living with HIV find that they get the most sexual pleasure when they know that they are having sex as safely as possible.

One of the hardest things about dating, sex and relationships is the possibility of being rejected by someone you are attracted to or in a relationship

with. You may worry that your current or potential partner(s) will reject you, or get angry or violent, if they find out you are living with HIV.

There are lots of people who are or gradually become comfortable being with someone who has HIV. There are other people who may never get used to it or who may even stigmatise or discriminate against people living with HIV. While people have the right to choose who to have relationships and sex with, it is not okay for someone to treat you badly because you are living with HIV. Your HIV status doesn't impact your ability to be a good partner. Being in a relationship with someone who has HIV is just as fulfilling and satisfying as with anyone else.

ONLY YOU KNOW THE BEST TIME TO DISCLOSE YOUR HIV STATUS...

There are many reasons that people do not share their HIV status. They may not want people to know they are living with HIV because of stigma and discrimination within their community. They may worry that people will find out something else they have kept secret, like they are using drugs, having sex outside of a marriage, having sex with people of the same gender, or having done sex work. People in long-term relationships who find out they are living with HIV sometimes fear that their partner will react violently or end the relationship. If you don't want to disclose to your partner, you need to make sure you are still practising safer sex. You can do this by taking your HIV treatment regularly to reduce your viral load, or by using condoms.

There are lots of people who don't mind whether their partner(s) is HIV negative or positive. Keep in mind that there are many reasons that people turn down sexual and romantic advances – and most have nothing to do with HIV.

TIPS FOR TELLING SEXUAL PARTNERS YOUR HIV STATUS:

→ **Practise disclosing to people you trust.**

This could include family members or friends. Remember that not everyone will react in the same way.

→ **Speak to other young people living with HIV,** or members of a support group, to learn from their experiences on different ways to disclose.

→ **Consider the timing.** When dating, some people tell their partner when they first meet while others wait till later. Do whatever makes you the most comfortable. If you are in a long-term relationship, try to find a time when your partner is calm and has time for a long conversation.

→ Choose a location that you feel comfortable and safe in – a private place like in your or a friend's house or in a public place where other people are around.

→ Test how your partner(s) may react to your HIV status by asking them questions like 'what do you think about HIV?' and 'have you met anyone with HIV?', or talking about a news story. This will help you get a sense of what they think about HIV and how they might react.

→ Think about their potential responses. What if they say nothing? What if they get angry or sad? How will respond to different reactions?

→ **Be ready for a conversation about HIV after you disclose.** Your partner(s) may have questions about living with HIV, such as the risk of transmission, and safer sex. They may also have questions about your relationship. Answering people's questions can be difficult so think about any information and leaflets you can give them to help them understand more about HIV. A counsellor can also help with this.

→ More often than not, disclosing is a process rather than a one-time event. Expect several conversations. Your partner(s) may need time to deal with their emotions. They may have new questions about HIV.

→ **Plan to meet up with people you trust after you disclose.** You can celebrate a positive outcome, discuss strategies for supporting a hesitant but willing partner, or get support for dealing with a negative reaction.

Disclosing your status can be difficult, especially if you are in a long-term relationship or marriage. Many people find that their partners are supportive. It can be hard to talk with your partner about your status. You may fear a violent reaction, losing the relationship, or maybe even losing your home, access to money, or your children.

There are many places that can help you figure out how to tell your partner and understand your rights to property and children if the relationship ends – for example, your local people living with HIV group, counsellors, women's groups, and legal clinics.