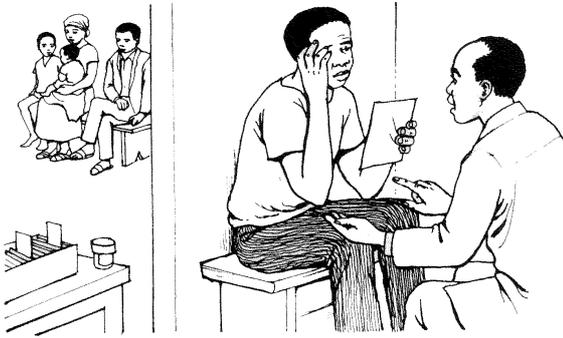


The first week after my HIV diagnosis

HIV changes your life completely. However, there is no need to panic. Here are a few guidelines for the first week after your diagnosis.



DAY 1: Take control of the situation

Decide on positive things to do for the rest of the day. You might decide to plait your friend's hair, to cook something special for your child, or to listen to your favourite music, go to the gym, kick a soccer ball or go for a jog. Whatever you do, don't go home and do nothing. Stay busy, life carries on.

DAY 2: Go back to the clinic for more counselling

Your counsellor, nurse or doctor might have talked a lot after they gave you your HIV result. Don't feel bad if you were too shocked to listen carefully. Go back to the clinic the next day and ask any questions you have. It will give the counsellor or nurse confidence to see that you come back to her/him. They will feel encouraged to spend more time with you. You should feel more relaxed and should be able to understand better what they say. Remember: you have a right to your own feelings and concerns. Do not be shy about them. Discuss them with your counsellor.

DAY 3: About being sick and being scared



Coping with illness is difficult. We all like to be independent and fit. However, if you are weak, try and allow friends and family to help you. This will also make them feel good. Rest in bed for a few days. This will help you to recover. Inform your work that you will

be off. Do not feel guilty about staying away from work. Remember that you will be much more effective at work once you are better again.

Many people are scared. HIV makes you fear death. They feel uncertain about what will happen to their children and loved ones if they should die. People are also afraid of stigma and discrimination. Try not to think too much about how others will respond. Rather think about your own health calmly. If you are sick at the time of your diagnosis, this is caused by an opportunistic illness, which can be treated. You might have TB, pneumonia, diarrhoea or another treatable illness. HIV can take up to eight years or longer to develop into AIDS.



You have a right to your own feelings. Discuss them with your counsellor.

DAY 4: Talk to a friend or to your family



Talking to another person about your HIV will help you deal with your own feelings. Sometimes it is easier to first talk to a person who is not too close to you, but who you can trust. However, your family knows you well and will understand your needs. Therefore it is good if you can talk to a family member. It is also necessary to talk to your sexual partner. This is not easy. However, the longer you wait, the more difficult it will become. Take the courage and do it. If you do

not know how to go about it, take your partner to the clinic and ask the counsellor to help you.

DAY 5: Join a support group

Other people living with HIV will understand you best. They have gone through the same process as you. Listening to them talk about their experiences will answer many of your questions. You will gain confidence and have fewer doubts. There are HIV support groups at some clinics. If there is no support group in your area, you should start one with your counsellor.

DAY 6: Healthy living, what about sex?

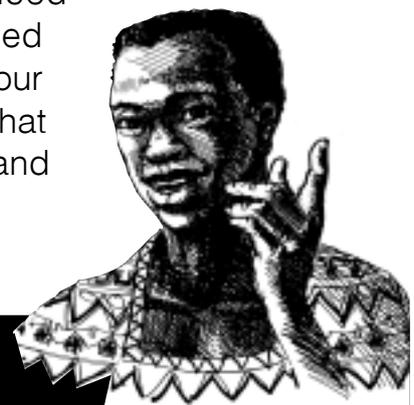
There is no reason for your family to be scared that you could infect them with HIV. There is no risk for them in sharing the same house, bathroom, toilet, eating utensils and plates. Even your partner is not at risk. You can have a normal sex life. As long as you use condoms, you cannot infect anyone else with HIV. Also try to live a healthy lifestyle. You can eat all the foods you have always eaten, but make sure that you eat regularly. Try to eat at least three meals a day as well as some fruit or yoghurt or sour milk or *mageu* in between. Avoid drinking alcohol – wine, spirits, beer etc. If you are a smoker try to stop or reduce smoking. Take some time to exercise and to relax. Spend quality time with friends and family. Enjoy life and be proud of what you do.

DAY 7: Find out more about HIV treatments



Nowadays HIV can be treated like sugar diabetes – you have to take medicines for the rest of your life, but they will keep you healthy. These medicines are called antiretrovirals or ARVs.

Only people with advanced forms of HIV disease need them. Discuss this with your doctor. Ask her or him what stage of HIV you are in and how you can monitor it.



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Talking to another person about your HIV will help you deal with your own feelings.

You have a right to confidentiality

Being HIV positive means that you have an illness like any other illness. Nobody is allowed to discriminate against you because of your illness. The community is not allowed to abuse you or laugh at you because of HIV. Also, you may not lose your job because you have HIV.



In fact, nobody is supposed to know about your HIV illness unless you decide to tell them. This is called privacy. Only you and the staff at your clinic know about your HIV test result. The clinic staff might like to tell your family about your HIV illness so that they can help you better. This they may only do with your permission. Your family will often follow you in the attitude you adopt towards your HIV. If you accept it, they usually do too. Allow all people who need to take care of you to know your status in order to improve the care. Make them promise they won't tell anyone.

Discrimination at clinics?

Clinics and hospitals are not allowed to give you second-class service just because you have been diagnosed with HIV. In fact, our government has issued a Patients' Rights Charter that specifically says, "Everyone has the right to access to health care services that include provision for special needs in case of ... a person living with HIV or AIDS patients."

However, sometimes there is discrimination at clinics. Most health care workers have not been trained to treat people with HIV. Therefore, they often do not know that people living with HIV can get treatments just like people with other illnesses. Many health care workers treat hospital resources as if these were their personal property. They often do not understand that available medications should be given to patients in the community who need them most.

Do not accept it if a health care worker says to you nothing can be done. There is always something they can do for you. The sicker you are, the more they should do. If you feel you have been badly treated, discuss this with your counsellor or approach the sister-in-charge with a written complaint.

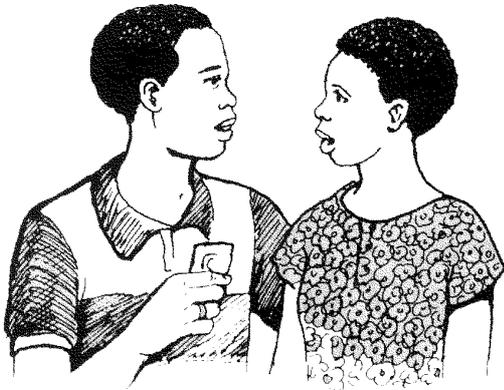
Do I need a funeral policy?

It is important to have a will. Unfortunately some funeral policies discriminate against people living with HIV. Before you rush to join a burial society, remember that healthy living rather than dying is the first thing you should



focus on. It is true that many people die of HIV related illnesses, but an HIV positive person can live a long and healthy life. The public perception that “there is no cure for HIV” is confusing. It is true that, at the moment, there is no cure for HIV. However, there is also no cure for potentially deadly chronic illnesses such as sugar diabetes

or high blood pressure. Nevertheless, people who have these illnesses can live normal lives, provided they stay on treatment. This is also the case with HIV, especially if you look after your health, treat any infection you get early and get antiretroviral treatment for HIV.



What does it mean to be HIV positive?

When you test HIV positive it means you have HIV germs in your blood. The HIV test cannot show when you got infected with this germ. The most

common way to get infected with HIV is having sex without condoms. This can happen even if you have only one partner and do not use condoms.

If you have had more than one partner you will not know who infected you. It is not important. What is important is that you infect no one else. Make sure that you always use condoms in future. Bring your partner to the clinic so that he or she can also be counselled and tested. Many people make the mistake to think that their husband, wife or partner will automatically be HIV positive. This is not so. Even if you have sex without a condom it does not mean that your partner gets infected with HIV every time. However, it is not worth living in uncertainty.

What is the advantage of knowing your HIV status?

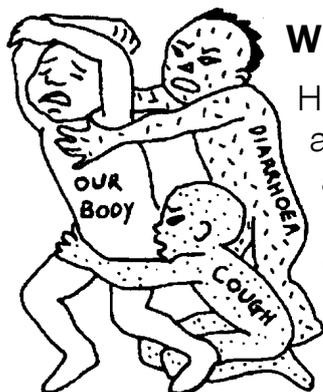
When you test HIV positive or HIV negative, we call this your HIV status. If your partner’s status is HIV negative it means that s/he probably does not have HIV at present. This should encourage both of you to always use condoms in future. An HIV negative result is not a sign that s/he is immune. It takes up to three months for an HIV test to show positive after infection with HIV. This is called the window period. It is therefore advisable that your partner comes for more counselling and another HIV test after three months.





If the HIV test is positive it is a shock, but it is better to know. There are many things you can do:

- Get counselling about living with HIV. Join an HIV support group.
- Eat healthily. Eat at least three meals a day. Also eat fruit or a snack in between meals.
- Exercise regularly.
- Have good times, listen to music, go to movies, visit friends, but avoid alcohol and smoking.
- Visit a clinic regularly. Get treatments for illnesses associated with HIV. Taking medicines regularly can prevent many illnesses.
- You can take better decisions about whether to have a child or not.
- You can protect your sexual partner from getting HIV by using condoms.
- Learn more about HIV. Prepare yourself to take life-long medication.
- If you are religious, go to your religious group.
- Care for yourself. Care for others.



What medicines must I take?

HIV is a lifelong illness. In the beginning you might not need any tablets at all. However, if you feel sick, a nurse or doctor should examine you and give you the correct medicines. People living with HIV can get many different illnesses together with the HIV. These illnesses are called opportunistic infections. If you have TB, you should get TB medicines. If you have diarrhoea, you should get advice on using a glucose drink and, if necessary, get some medicines.

Why do people living with HIV get many illnesses?

You can get sick if germs enter your body. Germs are so small that one cannot see them, but there are germs all around us. They are in the air, in water, in foods, on toilets. They can also be on unwashed hands, in people's cough, in people's sexual fluids or in blood. Your skin protects your body against many germs. However, germs can enter your body when you scratch yourself, when you breathe, drink, eat or have sex without a condom. TB is one germ that can enter your body. Meningitis pneumonia and chickenpox are other examples. Once germs are inside your body the blood has a mechanism to notice the germs and fight them. Special cells in the blood called white blood cells do this. This mechanism is called your immune system. The HIV germs live in the white blood cells and weaken the immune system. That is why it is called Human Immunodeficiency Virus: "Immunodeficiency" means that the immune system is weakened.

Why is HIV difficult to treat?

A virus is a type of germ that cannot live on its own. It can only reproduce when it is inside another living being. This makes it very difficult to treat all illnesses caused by viruses.



Most illnesses can be treated. Demand the correct medicines from your clinic.

What is AIDS?

Not everybody living with HIV has AIDS. AIDS indicates that you have a more advanced form of HIV illness and that you need antiretroviral medicines. Somebody who is infected with HIV has no symptoms for up to ten years. Then s/he will have minor illnesses like skin problems or flu. Only when s/he gets severe illnesses, this is called AIDS. HIV related illnesses are divided into four stages. If you have an illness of stage four this is also called AIDS. Although there is no cure for HIV, most HIV related illnesses can be treated. Even stage four illnesses can often be treated successfully and you can feel healthy again. Since you can get many different illnesses, doctors call it a syndrome. Therefore the name AIDS - Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.



What are antiretrovirals?

Antiretrovirals are the only medicines that can stop the HIV germs from multiplying in your body. In this way they can protect your immune system. It is not advisable to use antiretrovirals while the HIV is still weak. Discuss with your doctor when the best time would be for you to use antiretrovirals.

Keep informed about special ways of getting access to antiretrovirals for when you need them. Once you have started you should be monitored. The treatment is life-long. Antiretrovirals are very expensive and are therefore not available at most clinics.

Pregnant women can also use antiretrovirals to reduce the risk of the baby being infected with HIV during birth. Nevirapine or AZT are the antiretroviral medicines most commonly used to reduce this risk.

To treat HIV you have to take a combination of three antiretrovirals. This is more effective than using one or two antiretrovirals on their own. At the moment there are fifteen different antiretrovirals available in South Africa. They are divided into three classes: the nukes, non-nukes and protease inhibitors (PIs). Some popular combinations are: d4T, 3TC and Nevirapine or AZT, ddI and Efavirenz.



HIV progression

HIV is a chronic illness. Once you have it, you have it for life. It can take two to ten years from infection until you get sick for the first time. This time period is different for every person. It is important to monitor how far your HIV illness has progressed. This helps the nurses and doctors decide when to start certain medicines like cotrimoxazole or antiretrovirals. Cotrimoxazole is an antibiotic that prevents certain opportunistic infections, like pneumonia. The better you look after your health, the longer you can stay healthy.



The World Health Organisation Staging System or WHO Staging System is an effective way to monitor HIV progression. This system helps doctors compare the severity of the illness between patients. This they do according to the opportunistic infections - the illnesses that make use of a weak immune system to attack people living with HIV. There is no need for complicated laboratory tests. Nurses and doctors can classify your HIV disease into a stage after asking you about previous problems and examining you.

The WHO stages

Stage 1: You are HIV positive, but you have no symptoms. You have had no HIV related illness in the last five years. The only problem you might have is harmless swelling of the lymph glands.

Stage 2: You are HIV positive and you have minor illnesses. These include skin problems, flu, tonsillitis and ear infections.

Stage 3: You might have lost more than 10% of your weight. You experience illnesses such as diarrhoea, temperature for more than a month, thrush in the mouth and pneumonia or TB of the lung.

Stage 4: When you reach

stage 4, it is called AIDS. Illnesses that only people with weak immune systems can get are classified here. They include PCP pneumonia, toxoplasmosis stroke, isospora diarrhoea and cryptococcal meningitis. Illnesses that people living with HIV get in more severe forms are also classified here.

