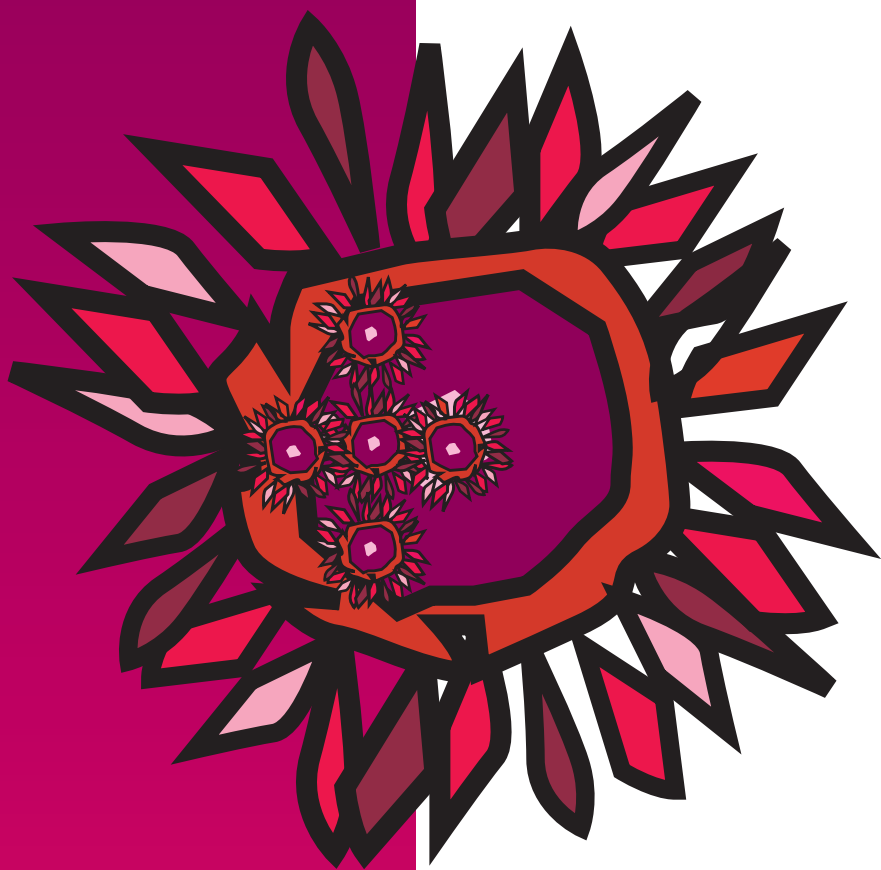


now that you know

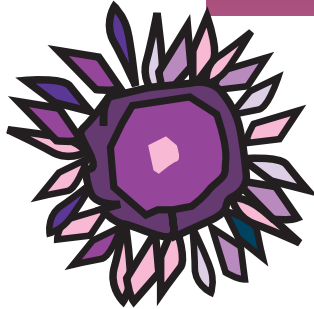


life after diagnosis

"I was diagnosed in August of 1990 and I am still here, strong and positive. For me, getting involved has been the most positive reinforcement. I realize that not everyone is at the same place at the same time. That's okay. There is always a supportive "ear", a resource or someone that can assist with your fears, concerns and questions. Don't be afraid to ask. Let's stand strong and positive together."

Jane Wallace
HIV+ 13 years

you are not alone.

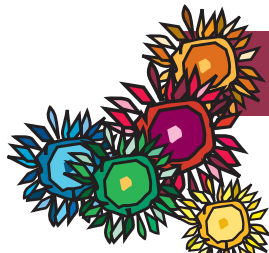


If you have just been diagnosed with HIV one of the most important things to realize is that you don't have to deal with this alone.

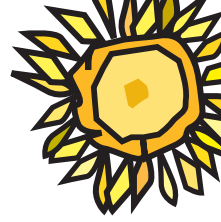
Being connected to Voices of Positive Women (Voices) is an excellent place to start. Voices has a wide range of programs and services available to women throughout Ontario. Voices can connect you with other HIV+ women and services in your community through its Peer Mentor program and referral network; provide counselling services, written resources specific to women and much more.

Remember as individual as women are, so is this disease and how it affects us. The more you learn about HIV and how it specifically affects you, the more likely it is that you will be confident in making decisions about your health. The quote "knowledge is power" is very true when it comes to living with HIV.

Become empowered!



so your test is positive?



what do you need to know?

"I was diagnosed HIV positive when I was hospitalized with PCP pneumonia. My T4 count was 5. I was shocked, confused and afraid that I would not survive the next month. I immediately phoned the AIDS info line and took control by doing research and finding the right HIV specialist. Now, a year later with medication, I feel great! My T4 count is 160 and my viral load is undetectable. I feel perfectly normal and active and I am working. I am so grateful for the support Voices has offered me and the information I received from the HIV/AIDS organizations in my city."

G.H.
HIV+ 9 years



Finding out that you have tested HIV positive can be completely overwhelming.

With a lot of letters and numbers flying around you might think that you are in some sort of horrific chemistry class. However, identifying the key terms and knowing what they mean can assist you in making treatment decisions that are right for you.

After testing HIV positive your doctor will run tests to determine your viral load and CD4+ cell count. These tests help in assessing the stage of your illness.



Viral Load is a measure of the amount of HIV virus in your blood. Values can range from below 50, also known as undetectable up to and over 1,000,000. The lower the viral load the better. A result of undetectable does not mean you are no longer HIV positive but rather that the test used is not able to detect the virus.

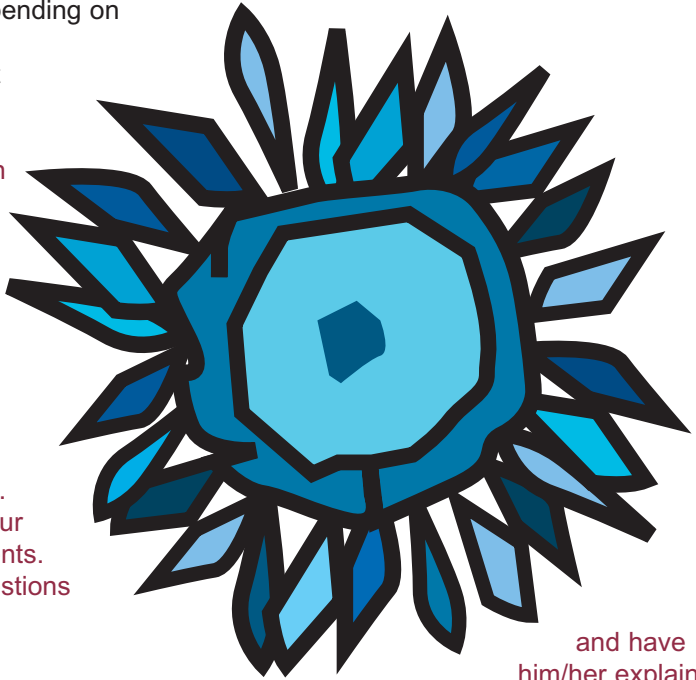
CD4+ cell count measures the number of CD4+ cells (also known as T cells) in your blood. These are the cells in the body that help to fight off infection and illness. They are a target for the HIV virus. The normal range is from 400 - 1 800 cells/ml. A low CD4+ cell count (below 200) is associated with the development of opportunistic infections in individuals living with HIV.





Current recommendations for starting antiretroviral therapy are a CD4+ count below 350 and a viral load of more than 55 000. However, this is only a guide and you may start treatment at a different time depending on your health and readiness to start therapy.

If possible, learn all you can about the options available to you before starting treatment. Remember that your doctor is there for you. Prepare for your appointments. Ask questions



and have him/her explain the risks and benefits of various health management strategies.

What are the possible side effects of the medications they may be recommending and how long might these side effects persist?

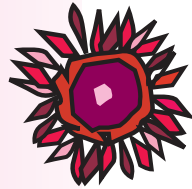
At the same time, you will want to assess your overall situation. How are you feeling both mentally and physically? Are you ready to commit to antiretroviral treatment? Do you have support to help you through difficult times?

It may sound like a lot of work but remember there are many resources available and you are worth it!

what about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) ?

"I haven't been on antiviral medication for the 12 years I have been positive. I have tried to stay healthy by doing yoga, exercising, taking vitamins and supplements or Complimentary Alternative Medicines (CAM), counselling and most of all taking time out to relax. I feel that stress and harm reduction are key to my good physical health. I have observed that at times when I am stressed, using recreational drugs or drinking in excess I start to get low CD4 counts and feel tired, so I slow down. It's important to look at your health in a holistic manner meaning mind, body and soul and most importantly to learn how to listen to what your body is telling you.

Jenni
HIV + 12 years



Complementary and alternative medicine refers to any practice used to enhance health and well-being that falls outside of the category of conventional Western medicine. Complementary medicine refers to treatments used in conjunction with Western medicine. Alternative medicine refers to treatments used instead of Western medicine.

A 1998 Ontario study found that over 70% of people with HIV use some sort of CAM. The following are some of the reasons:

- to strengthen the immune system
- to manage side effects of HIV medications
- to reduce stress and promote relaxation
- to create balance and treat the body as a whole
- to be active in their own health care.

NOTE: If you are taking prescription medications, including HIV therapy and antidepressants, it is important that you talk to your doctor before taking any complimentary medicine in order to avoid negative interactions.

who should I tell?

“Disclosure” means telling someone that you are HIV+. Who to tell about your HIV status and how to tell them can be a very complex and personal decision.

There is no one best way to tell someone, just as there is no sure way to gauge their reaction to your news. While disclosure is never easy, it may help (if it is possible) if you take some time to plan so that you are able to disclose under the best possible conditions.

There are several things you will have to decide before disclosing. First and foremost is whom you want or need to tell.

You do not have to tell everyone that you are HIV+. You should tell people that you may have exposed to HIV so that they can be tested and seek medical attention if required. These people could be sexual contacts or people with whom you have shared needles. If you do not want to tell them yourself, The Public Health department can inform your contacts without even using your name. Under Canadian law a person who knows they are HIV+ may be found guilty of the crime of “assault” if they have unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse without disclosing their HIV+ status.



"I have told some people my HIV status. They have all been accepting and are proud of my contributions. If someone rejects me because of my HIV then it probably isn't someone I want in my life anyway".

Tracey Conway
HIV+ 7 years

You need to tell your doctors and other healthcare providers to ensure you receive appropriate care. Your doctor also needs to know how you were infected to determine if you are at risk for other diseases, such as hepatitis C.



Below is a list of other questions you can use as a guide to plan your disclosure. While there are no "right" answers, these questions may help you decide how to disclose in the best possible way for you.

What information are you ready to share or are they ready to hear?

How will disclosing my HIV status affect me and how will it affect the people around me? Where will we get support?

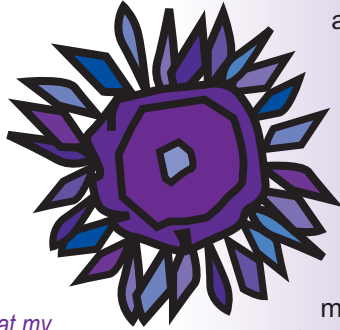
Where do you want the disclosure to take place? Is this a safe space for me?

When do you want to tell?

There is no one best way to disclose your HIV status. However, planning ahead each time you disclose will help you to do so under the best possible conditions.

what about sex and relationships?

HIV can affect your feelings about sexuality and relationships. Some women don't want to be touched because they feel dirty or ashamed. Others fear infecting their partners or being rejected. If you have these types of feelings, you are not alone.



"When I was diagnosed at age 39 in Southern Ontario I just assumed that my love life was over and that I would remain single until I died. I never thought anyone would love me again. Eventually, through friends, I met my fiancée who is HIV-. We have been together for 5 years... my sex life has never been better."

Sarah

HIV+ 10 years

Medical conditions and treatments can affect your sexuality.

Depression may cause you to lose interest in sex and relationships. HIV drugs may cause body shape changes, fatigue and altered hormone levels which can affect your interest in sex. It is important to find out why you lack desire or are not satisfied. Your doctor may be able to recommend ways to improve your libido (desire for sex).

HIV positive women need to know about safer sex, for our own and for our partner's protection. Barrier methods of protection, like condoms and dental dams, are the safest for both partners. Unprotected sex may expose you to sexually transmitted diseases such as herpes and syphilis. Unprotected sex with an HIV+ partner could cause you to be re-infected with HIV and may put you at risk for developing resistance to HIV drugs you have never taken.

Although HIV may change how you feel about sex many HIV positive women have found healthy, satisfying relationships.

can I have children?

"I have 6 children. The oldest is 12 years old. When I tested positive I felt that I was going to die. Now, after I have met so many healthy women and many of those women are giving birth to healthy children, I just know that everything will be okay. Back in my home country HIV means it's over, but here there are so many options."

Jeanette

HIV+ 6 months

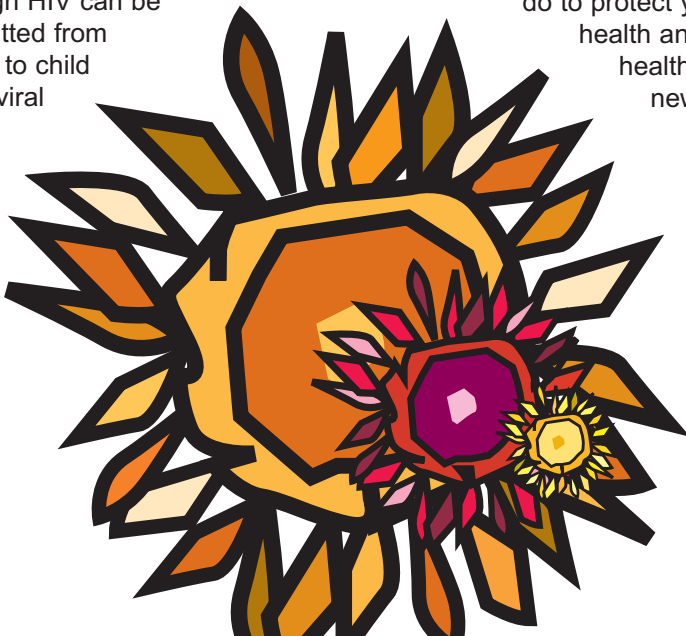
With advances in HIV care and treatment, many HIV+ women are living longer, healthier lives. As they think about the future, some of these women are deciding to have the babies they always wanted.

The good news is that the rate of mother-to-child HIV transmission has been dramatically reduced. If the mother takes appropriate medical precautions, the rate of transmission can be reduced from 25 percent to below 2 percent. In addition, studies have shown that being pregnant will not make HIV progress faster in the mother.

Although HIV can be transmitted from mother to child at any viral

load, there is evidence that a low viral load decreases the risk. The best way to reduce viral load is through a combination regimen of HIV medications. Talk to your doctor about what medications to take in the best interest of your health and the baby's health.

Deciding to have a baby is a big step for any woman, but for an HIV+ woman it is even more complicated. Whenever possible, talk to your doctor for "preconception" health care and counselling before you start trying to get pregnant. If you plan ahead, there are many things you can do to protect your health and the health of your new baby.



how will HIV affect my immigration status?



"I came to Canada in 1990 from Uganda. I didn't know if I was going to get my Immigration status especially when I received the bad news that I was HIV positive. I was very scared that I was going to get deported or not receive my immigration status papers because I was HIV positive. Voices of Positive Women connected me with the HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario and an immigration lawyer who made me realize that I could not be refused just because of my HIV status. At times, it can feel hopeless and depressing when you are going through the immigration experience. It is important to surround yourself with all the support possible. In 2002 I received my landed papers and I have been assured that I will receive my Canadian citizenship, never lose hope."

Catherine B.
HIV + 8 years

Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) requires all foreign nationals over 15 years of age who are applying for permanent residence in Canada to undergo an "immigration medical exam" that includes an HIV test.

If you are applying for permanent residence as a refugee (from in or outside Canada), or a sponsored spouse, common law partner or dependent child you will not be refused admittance because of your HIV+ status. Other categories of applicants who are HIV+ will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and may be refused permanent residence if it is determined that they will place excessive demands on government services as a result of their medical condition.

If you are a refugee claimant whose claim has been acknowledged or settled, you may be eligible for Federal or Provincial health coverage.

The immigration process can be very complicated. The above is not legal advice. If you have questions or are experiencing difficulties, please seek legal advice.

where can I find support and information?



Voices of
Positive
Women

(VOPW) offers a variety of support programs. HIV+ peer mentors available for support, information and referral, free vitamin supplements are available for HIV+ women in Ontario. There are also many other resources available to assist HIV positive women in Ontario. We have listed a few of them to help you get started.

To find resources in your area please visit our VOCALIZE database at www.vopw.org or call Voices of Positive Women Toll free 1-800-263-0961 or 416-324-8703

Domestic Violence

Hot Peach Pages: World-Wide List of Abuse Agencies

International inventory of hotlines, shelters, refuges, crisis centres and women's organizations, searchable by country, plus index of domestic violence resources in over 70 languages.

Crisis hotline # for Ontario
1-866-863-0511

<http://www.hotpeachpages.net>

legal and immigration

HIV AIDS Legal Network of Ontario (HALCO)

Toll free at 1-888-705-8889 or locally at 416-340-7790

www.halco.org

Prisoner's AIDS Support and Action Network (PASAN)

TEL 416-920-9567

E-MAIL info@pasan.org

www.pasan.org



pregnancy and family issues

Motherisk

Health line and confidential counselling to Canadian women, their families and healthcare professionals about the risk of HIV and HIV treatment in pregnancy
1-888-246-5840

www.motherisk.org

The Teresa Group

Practical assistance to families affected by HIV. Provincial formula program provides free formula to HIV-positive mothers in Ontario.
416-596-7703

www.teresagroup.org

Voices of Positive Women HIV and Pregnancy Booklet
"life goes on..."



treatment (CAM and Traditional)

Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE)

Toll free 1-800-263-1638 or 416-203-7122

www.catie.ca

The Well Project

www.thewellproject.com

Project Inform

www.projinf.org

The Body

www.thebody.com





A community based non-profit organization directed by and for women living with HIV/AIDS in Ontario



Women live strong lives with HIV/AIDS.

Suite 105, 66 Isabella St.
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1N3

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acknowledgments *You Are Not Alone* by Jane Wallace
So Your Test Is Positive? What Do You Need To Know? by Tracey Conway
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What About Sex And Relationships? by Shari Margolese
How Will HIV Affect My Immigration Status? Information provided by the HIV AIDS Legal Network of Ontario



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