

*Information  
for Women  
who are  
Diagnosed  
with HIV  
during  
Pregnancy*



Finding out you have HIV when you are pregnant can be very scary and overwhelming. You may have many questions, such as: How long will I live? Will my baby be HIV positive? Does my partner have HIV? What kind of medication should I take? How will I tell my family and friends that I have HIV?

First, take a deep breath. You are not alone. Know that you and your baby will get through this and that life goes on, even with HIV. With the proper care, chances are very good that your baby will be born HIV negative and that you will be healthy enough to care for him or her.

## *What are HIV and AIDS?*

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system and weakens it over time. When a person's immune system is weakened to a certain point, they can become infected with life-threatening infections, such as tuberculosis and pneumonia. When this happens, a person is said to have AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

People get HIV mainly through having unprotected sex or sharing needles with a person who is HIV positive. You cannot give or get HIV by hugging, kissing or sharing eating utensils.

After your diagnosis, you will have blood tests to check your CD4 count and your viral load. These tests help track your immune system and the virus.

## *How is HIV treated?*

Medication that fights HIV is called antiretroviral therapy (ART). Many people diagnosed with HIV stay healthy for some time without starting ART. The best time to start ART is usually before your CD4 count falls too low and the risk of getting sick increases. While it is your choice whether or not to start ART, taking ART when you are pregnant greatly reduces the chance of your baby getting HIV.

## *How can HIV infect the baby?*

HIV can pass from you to your baby:

- before birth (while in the womb)
- during birth (when the baby is being delivered through the birth canal)
- after birth (through breast-feeding)

## *How can I prevent HIV from infecting my baby?*

You can reduce the chance of your baby getting HIV to less than 1 in 100 by taking ART and getting good health care while you're pregnant and by not breast-feeding your baby. Speak to your HIV specialist or obstetrician (a doctor who specializes in pregnancy and childbirth) or midwife about what you need to do.

## How do I find a knowledgeable obstetrician?

Your family doctor or HIV specialist will most likely refer you to an obstetrician with expertise in HIV. It is important to have an open, honest relationship with your obstetrician; you should be able to discuss all of your questions and concerns with your doctor. For example, you should be able to talk about the symptoms or side effects that you have. While some symptoms—such as nausea, vomiting, heartburn, abdominal pain, constipation and leg swelling—are normal during pregnancy, they can also be side effects from your anti-HIV drugs. Speak to your healthcare provider if these symptoms become unbearable.



You should disclose to people you have had sex with or have shared needles with. They might be infected with HIV as well, and having this information allows them to be tested and to get treatment if necessary. If you find it hard to tell them yourself, the Public Health department can contact them without giving away your name.

If you choose to not disclose to a person you are having sex with, you could possibly face criminal charges. You should also tell your family doctor or obstetrician so they can refer you to an HIV specialist.

Disclosing to intimate partner(s) and people you love is never easy and there is no easy way to do it.

However, you can make it easier by planning what you are going to say, how much you are going to say, and where you will have the talk. Here are some questions you may want to think about:

- Who do I tell?
- How much do I tell so that the other person can understand and not be overwhelmed?
- When will I tell?
- How will disclosing my HIV status change my relationships with the people I am close to?
- How will I deal with stigma?
- Where can I get support?
- Will there be threats of violence or abuse?
- Where is a safe place to tell?

## Disclosure

### What does it mean to disclose my status? Who do I have to tell?

Disclosing your status means telling someone else you have HIV. For the most part, it is your choice whether to tell and who to tell. However, there are specific people you should tell, both for their health and yours.

## Abortion

Some women may wish to end (abort) their pregnancy. In Canada, it is your choice whether or not you wish to continue your pregnancy. You should never feel pressured to have an abortion just because you are HIV positive.

## What other services and support are available to me?

You may find it very helpful to contact your local AIDS service organization after you are diagnosed. They can give you more information about HIV, pregnancy and treatment options so you can make smart decisions about your health. They will also help you access the many different services available to HIV positive people, such as disability benefits or prenatal care. Finally, they can provide you with emotional and psychological support as you learn to live with HIV.



## Acknowledgements

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## *Where can I get support and more information?*

A partial list of organizations that help HIV positive women with their pregnancy and fertility needs:

### *Mother Risk*

Toronto, Ontario  
1-888-246-5840  
momrisk@sickkids.ca  
www.motherisk.org

### *The Hospital for Sick Children*

Toronto, Ontario  
www.aboutkidshealth.ca

### *AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia*

Halifax, Nova Scotia  
902-425-4882 x225  
1-800-566-2437  
sc@acns.ns.ca  
www.acns.ns.ca

### *Centre for AIDS Services Montreal (Women)*

Montreal, Quebec  
514-495-0990  
direction@casm-mtl.org  
netrover.com/~casm

### *Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy*

Toronto, Ontario  
416-944-9481  
1-800-743-8851  
info@oahas.org  
www.oahas.org

### *The Teresa Group*

Toronto, Ontario  
416-596-7703  
info@teresagroup.ca  
www.teresagroup.ca

### *Women's Health in Women's Hands*

Toronto, Ontario  
416-593-7655  
whiwh@web.net  
www.whiwh.com

### *Nine Circles Community Health Centre*

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
204-940-6000  
1-888-305-8647  
ninecircles@ninecircles.ca  
www.ninecircles.ca

### *Positive Women's Network*

Vancouver, British  
Columbia  
604-692-3000  
1-866-692-3001  
pwn@pwn.bc.ca  
www.pwn.bc.ca

### *Oak Tree Clinic*

Vancouver, British  
Columbia  
604-875-2212  
1-888-711-3030 (in BC)