

**LET'S TALK** about



## ***Safer sex: It's about more than condoms***

LEARN ALL THE WAYS PEOPLE  
LIVING WITH HIV CAN PROTECT THEIR HEALTH AND  
PREVENT TRANSMITTING HIV TO OTHERS

## ***Your choices matter***

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Today, people living with HIV can live longer, healthier lives with the right medicines and ongoing medical care.

And today there are more strategies than ever before to help prevent transmitting HIV to your sexual partners. Any of these strategies alone can lower your chance of transmitting HIV, but you can lower your chances even more by taking multiple actions. The more actions you take, the safer you can be.

On the following pages you'll find answers to questions commonly asked by people living with HIV, along with tips and resources to help you learn all the ways you can protect your own health and help prevent transmitting HIV to others.

***Talk with your health care provider to choose the right strategies that work for you and your sexual partner.***

A woman with long brown hair and glasses, wearing a purple sweater and light-colored pants, is sitting and hugging a black and white dog. The dog is leaning its head against her face. The background is slightly blurred, showing a window and a decorative wall panel.

***“HIV infects one of us, but it affects all of us.”***

*Elizabeth - Boston, MA  
Living with HIV since 2001.*

## **Q.** *What do my HIV medicines have to do with sex?*



**A.** For people with HIV, taking HIV medicines, known as ***antiretroviral therapy, or ART***, consistently and correctly is the most important thing you can do.

ART reduces the amount of virus in the blood, called the “viral load.” ART is extremely effective and can reduce the level of HIV in the blood to such a low level that current HIV tests cannot detect it. This is called “undetectable viral load.” Having an undetectable viral load does not mean that a person no longer has HIV.

Having an undetectable viral load is important to an HIV-positive person’s overall health. It also greatly reduces the chance of transmitting the virus to a sexual or drug-using partner who is HIV-negative.

However, this is only true if a person gets and stays undetectable. An example of something that can increase your viral load is not taking your HIV medicines consistently and correctly. Because there may still be a chance that you can

transmit HIV on ART, adding other prevention strategies, like condoms or PrEP for your HIV-negative partner, can be considered to further reduce the chance of transmission.

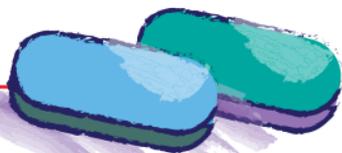
## **Q. If I accidentally expose someone to HIV, can I give them my HIV medicine?**

**A.** No, you need your ART for your own health. However, there are medicines that people who are HIV-negative can take to help prevent HIV if they have been exposed to HIV. An example of an exposure is if you had sex with someone who is HIV-negative and the condom breaks. Your chance of exposing your partner to HIV is much lower if you are taking ART consistently and correctly, especially if your viral load is undetectable.

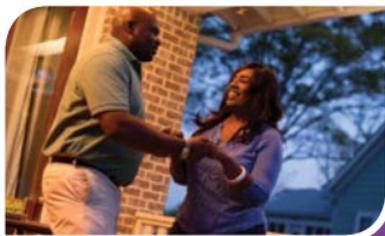
**Post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP,** is prescribed by a health care provider or emergency room doctor, and should be started as soon as possible after the exposure, and always within 72 hours for HIV prevention. PEP involves taking medicine once or twice a day for 28 days as directed by a health care provider. The sooner your sex partner starts PEP, the better; every hour counts.



**Q.** *I've heard there are medicines that my HIV-negative partner can take every day to help prevent HIV. What are they?*



**A.** Medicines called ***pre-exposure prophylaxis (or PrEP)*** are prescribed for people who don't have HIV but may be at high risk for getting HIV to lower their chances of getting the virus. PrEP medicines can only be prescribed by a health care provider and should be taken daily to prevent HIV infection.



Your taking ART consistently and correctly is good for your overall health and greatly reduces your chances of transmitting HIV to your sex and drug-using partners. Taking additional steps, like using condoms or having your partner take PrEP, provides extra protection.

PrEP may be an option for some of your sex partners.

***PrEP provides a high level of protection***  
against HIV if used consistently and correctly.

## ***Fast Facts About HIV Prevention With PrEP***

- HIV testing is required before starting PrEP (to be sure the person is still HIV-negative) and every 3 months while taking PrEP.
- PrEP is taken daily and must be regularly monitored by a health care provider.
- PrEP works best when taken consistently and correctly.
- The cost of PrEP is covered by some health insurance; medicine assistance programs may be available (see Resources on the back of this brochure)

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a light pink button-down shirt, is smiling and looking down at a table. The table is set with a lit candle in a glass holder, a vase of bright yellow sunflowers, and a wine glass. The background is softly blurred, showing green foliage and string lights hanging from above. The overall atmosphere is warm and intimate.

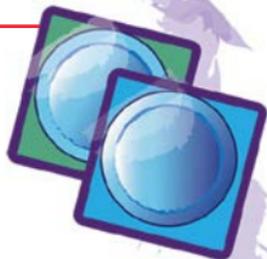
***“I make sure that he’s on his medicines to treat his HIV, and he makes sure that I continue my medicines to help me prevent getting HIV.”***

***Aaron - St. Louis, MO  
Living with HIV (and Phil) since 2011.***



## **Q.** *If I'm on ART, do I need to bother with condoms?*

**A.** Using a condom can benefit you as well as your sexual partners, and there are two main reasons why.



### **1.** *Condoms protect you and your partners from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)*

STDs can have long-term health consequences, especially for someone living with HIV. But STDs such as syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea can also increase the viral load in your genital fluids (vaginal/rectal fluids and semen), making it more likely for you to transmit to your sexual partners. Also, if your HIV-negative partners have an STD, they are more likely to get HIV from you. And since STDs don't always produce signs or symptoms, many people don't know they have them.

Condom use is the only prevention strategy that can prevent many STDs other than HIV. But it doesn't automatically protect you. You may not always know if your partner is having sex outside of the relationship or doing other things to increase the risk for getting STDs.

If you are sexually active, get tested for STDs at least once a year, and continue using condoms.

## ***2. Even if you have an undetectable viral load, you still have HIV***

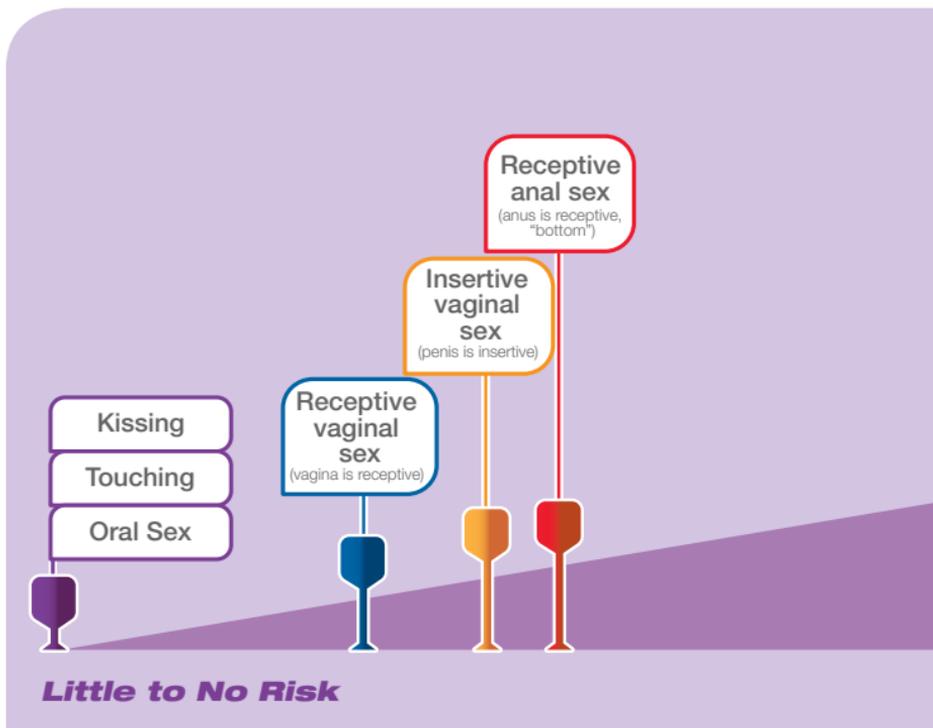
- ▶ The viral load test only measures virus levels in blood. But HIV may still be present in body fluids such as semen or vaginal fluids, even when it is undetectable in your blood.
- ▶ Your viral load may go up between tests. When this happens, you may be more likely to transmit HIV to sexual partners. Your viral load may go up without you knowing it because you may not feel any different.



Having an undetectable viral load is good for your health, and greatly lowers the chance of transmitting the virus to HIV-negative sexual partners. But taking other actions, like using a condom consistently and correctly, can lower your chances of transmitting HIV even more.

## **Q.** Besides medicines and condoms, what else can I do to prevent transmitting HIV?

**A.** Remember, HIV is transmitted during sex through bodily fluids, such as semen, pre-ejaculate, and vaginal/rectal fluids. It is not transmitted through sweat,



tears, or saliva. So some sexual activities have a lower risk for transmitting HIV than others. Use this chart to see how you can modify your sex life to reduce the chance of HIV transmission during sexual activity with an HIV-negative partner.

This chart shows the different risks of HIV transmission from an HIV-positive person to an HIV-negative partner based on different sexual activities. HIV transmission is less risky when the person living with HIV is the receptive partner.

*How your sexual behaviors differ in the risk of HIV-negative sexual partners getting HIV.*

**Insertive  
anal sex**  
(penis is insertive,  
"top")

**High Risk**

## **Q. How do I talk about safer sex and healthy relationships with my partners?**

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**A.** Chances are if you're confident and bring it up without judgment, your partner will be open to the discussion. For all you know, he or she could be just as worried as you to bring it up. Just remember, nearly everyone who is having sex will have this conversation at some point, and many others before you have already done so.

## **Q. What do drugs and alcohol have to do with transmitting HIV?**

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**A.** People who use alcohol or drugs may be at increased risk for getting or transmitting HIV or other STDs. For example, when you are drunk or high, you may be more likely to make decisions that put you at risk for HIV, such as having sex without a condom or sharing drug-injection needles or "works."



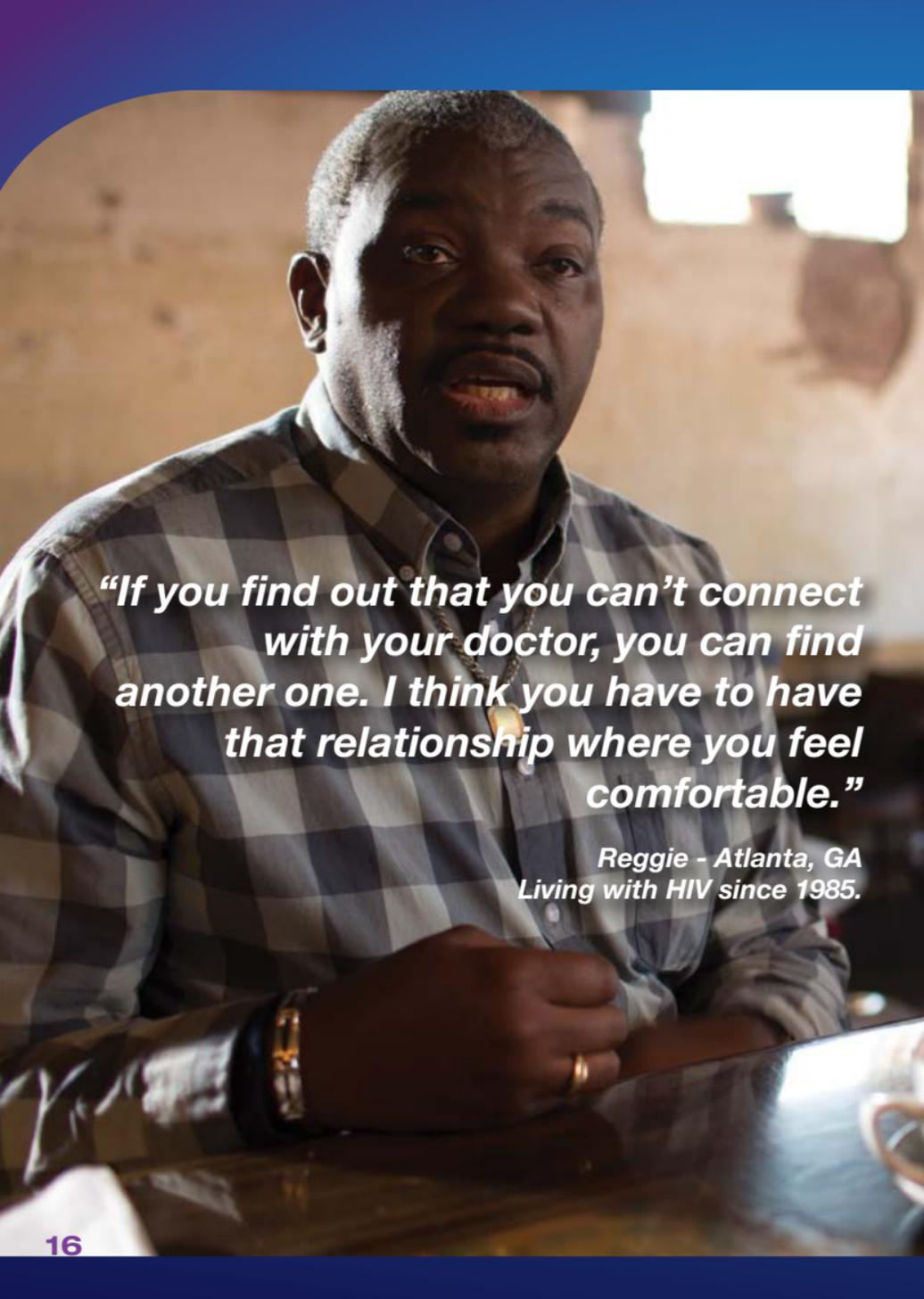
Be aware that ART can have serious interactions with other substances, including alcohol, over-the-counter drugs, recreational or party drugs, vitamins, and other medicines. So it's very important to be honest with your health care provider and pharmacist about any alcohol or drugs you are using in addition to ART. If you're not sure, just ask!

## **Q.** *What if I feel depressed?*



**A.** Depression or other mental health problems can lead people to do things that increase their risk of getting or transmitting HIV, such as having sex without condoms, having more sexual partners, trading sex for money, or injecting drugs and sharing needles.

People with HIV are at increased risk of having mental health problems. So if you have HIV, mental health screening (and treatment, if needed) should be a part of your regular, ongoing care.

A medium shot of a Black man with a mustache, wearing a grey and white plaid button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred indoor setting with warm lighting. A quote is overlaid on the image in white text.

***“If you find out that you can’t connect with your doctor, you can find another one. I think you have to have that relationship where you feel comfortable.”***

*Reggie - Atlanta, GA  
Living with HIV since 1985.*

***Q. How do I talk to my health care provider about all these things? It's awkward!***

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**A.** Yes, it can be awkward having talks about sex with anyone, especially a health care provider. Here are a few facts to help you feel more comfortable.

- ▶ The job of a health care provider is to care for your overall health, including your sexual health.
- ▶ Most health care providers want to help you, not judge you. If you approach the conversation openly and honestly, chances are they will too.
- ▶ Whatever it is you have to say, most likely your health care provider has heard it before. And he or she may have a great suggestion for you.

***Your health care provider wants to help you live a longer, healthier life. So start talking...today!***

## **Glossary**

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- **Antiretroviral therapy (ART):** A combination of medicines that keep HIV from growing and multiplying.
- **Fellatio:** The act of stimulating the penis with the mouth for sexual pleasure.
- **Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP):**  
HIV medicines that are taken within 72 hours after exposure to HIV to reduce the risk of becoming infected. The medicines are prescribed by a health care provider and taken for 28 days.
- **Pre-ejaculate:** The clear, colorless liquid that comes out of the penis during sexual arousal and before ejaculation (climaxing).
- **Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP):**  
HIV medicines that can be prescribed for people who are not HIV-positive but are at risk for HIV to reduce the risk of becoming infected. PrEP must be taken every day, and people must return to their health care provider every 3 months for monitoring and follow up.

- **Prophylaxis:** Measures to prevent or control the spread of an infection or disease.
- **Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs):** Diseases that are passed from one person to another through sexual contact. There are more than 20 types of STDs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes, HIV/AIDS, human papilloma virus (HPV), syphilis, and trichomoniasis.
- **Undetectable viral load:** The point at which the amount of HIV in your blood is too low to be measured by today's methods.
- **Viral load:** The level of HIV in the blood.



# Resources



## [\*\*cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks\*\*](http://cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks)

a website designed for persons living with HIV that includes information about HIV and features real people from across the United States talking about how sticking with care and treatment helps them stay healthy, live a longer, healthier life and prevent transmission.

## [\*\*cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/lsht\*\*](http://cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/lsht)

is designed for anyone who is HIV-positive along with their friends and family, featuring celebrities and others living with HIV.

## [\*\*cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking\*\*](http://cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking)

has information geared toward gay men about how to talk to your partner(s) about sex.

## [\*\*ashasexualhealth.org/sexual-health/all-about-condoms/talking-to-a-partner-about-condoms\*\*](http://ashasexualhealth.org/sexual-health/all-about-condoms/talking-to-a-partner-about-condoms)

has information about talking to your partner about using condoms.

## [\*\*cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html\*\*](http://cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html)

provides important information for your HIV-negative sexual or drug-injecting partners.

## [\*\*cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html\*\*](http://cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html)

provides information on medicines for HIV-negative people accidentally exposed (for example, if a condom breaks).

## [\*\*truvada.com/truvada-patient-assistance\*\*](http://truvada.com/truvada-patient-assistance)

explains how to get help paying for PrEP.

## **1-800-662-4357**

offers mental health, alcohol, or drug use services.

## **1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)**

for general information about HIV and its treatment.

