



Living With HIV

Think you know everything you need to know about HIV? These women share the real deal on living, loving and staying safe BY JEANNINE AMBER

Finally, some good news about HIV. Last December the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that for the first time since the early days of the HIV epidemic, there has been a drop in the rate of new infections among African-American women. While the 21 percent decline is significant, Black women are still contracting HIV and dying from AIDS at rates higher than those of any other group of women. In 2010, the latest year for which figures are available, Black women made up nearly two thirds of new HIV infections among women. And we are mostly likely to contract the virus from having sex with infected men. So what's behind our high rate of infection?

Almost 90% of Black women who contract HIV do so through heterosexual sex.

Lack of information about our own and our partners' HIV status and not enough open communication about sex are partially to blame, say the experts. To stem the tide of new infections we need knowledge about drugs that help prevent transmission, fresh strategies for dealing with men who refuse to suit up and more encouragement to get tested.

To answer your most pressing questions, ESSENCE spoke with three women—spokespeople with Empowered, the Kaiser Family Foundation's GreaterThanAIDS campaign—who are living with the virus and a leading medical expert in the field. Their responses will help keep you happy, healthy and safe.

Q My boyfriend won't use a condom. I know I should say no, but I want sex too. Any advice?

A "I know from experience what happens when you don't speak up about using a condom," says Stephanie, 26, a Fayetteville, North Carolina, AIDS activist. She contracted HIV as a 19-year-old college student. "I knew the guy I was having sex with had taken off the condom but I didn't say anything because I wanted it so bad," she says. Immediately after the encounter, Stephanie says she felt "dirty" and deeply disrespected. "I just knew something was wrong," she recalls. A few months later, she discovered she'd been infected when she got tested as part of a routine doctor's visit. Stephanie advises every woman to have a backup plan for times when a man won't wear a condom. "Keep your favorite vibrator under your pillow," she suggests. "If he won't put on a condom, tell him, 'Okay, I got me.' It's just not worth it to take a chance. If I had spoken up, I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in today."

Q The man I'm dating is HIV-positive. Will condoms protect me?

A For condoms to be effective, you have to follow some rules: "Pay attention to the expiration date on the box," warns Lisa K. Fitzpatrick, M.D., medical director of the infectious diseases center at United Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "And don't expose your condoms to extremes in temperatures." That means tossing the ones that have been in your glove compartment all summer. If your partner is HIV-positive, you can further protect yourself by making sure he is in the care of a doctor who is carefully monitoring his viral load—the amount of the HIV virus in his blood. The doctor may put your partner on medications to decrease his viral load, which significantly reduces the risk of him passing the infection on to you.

Q As a Black woman, do I need to take special precautions against HIV?

A There is nothing about our race that puts Black women more at risk, says Fitzpatrick. She points out that risk is elevated by having unprotected sex with HIV-positive men whose status is unknown. "One of the main problems we face is lack of communication," she explains. "We need to talk to our partners about their sexual past and about getting tested, not just for HIV but for all STDs." Fitzpatrick warns that having an STD, such as herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis, increases your risk for contracting HIV. And according to the CDC, African-Americans have rates of some STDs as much as 17 times higher than those of Whites. "An STD causes the internal tissues to become more pliable and prone to tears," explains Fitzpatrick. "And that can create an entry point for HIV."



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Q My HIV-positive friend stopped taking her meds and started taking African herbs instead. How can I talk sense into her?

A "No one wants to be on medication," says Empowered spokeswoman Kym, 34, who was diagnosed with HIV in 2011 and lives in Dallas. "But if the natural remedies are so good, why are we still looking for a cure?" In 2010 Kym married a man who was HIV-positive but had kept his status hidden. He admitted he had the virus when his health began to deteriorate after he had gone off his medication. He was dead before their first anniversary. Epidemiologist Fitzpatrick says anyone having trouble tolerating his or her HIV medication may be on an outdated drug regimen. "Since 2005 we've had



EVA, 37, mother of three, has been living with HIV for 18 years.

Q My boyfriend refuses to get an HIV test. What should I do?

A Find out what your man is afraid of. "I used to do HIV awareness in a detention center," says Stephanie. "These men had been stabbed and shot, but when it came to getting tested they were nervous about having a needle. I think they were scared because they had had unprotected sex." If your man says he doesn't like needles, explain that a rapid test can be done with a swab of the inside of his cheek, with results in as little as 20 minutes. Then offer to go with him so that testing is something the two of you are doing together, and for each other. Remind him that knowing your status will give you peace of mind, which will make you more relaxed in bed. If he still won't budge, consider it an indication that he has something significant to worry about, which means you should, too. Insist on a condom or no sex at all.

new drugs with few side effects that have revolutionized the way we think about HIV," she says. "These drugs are allowing us to treat HIV as a chronic disease like diabetes. If you find HIV early and treat the infection, it does not progress to AIDS. No one," insists the doctor, "has to get AIDS anymore."



KYM, 34, contracted the virus from her husband, who hid his status before they wed.

Q I just found out I'm HIV-positive. I'm scared I'll never get married and have children. What can I do?

A Eva, who lives in Atlanta, was diagnosed with HIV when she was 19 years old. She contracted the virus through unprotected sex with a man who later died from AIDS-related complications. "I thought, *What am I going to do? I can't have children. I can't get married. Nobody's going to accept me,*" she recalls. Today the Empowered spokesperson says the first step after receiving a positive diagnosis is to get accurate information. "There are a lot of myths about what it means to be HIV-positive," Eva says. Learn your viral load and the medications you need to stay healthy, and find a support group in which you can speak to other HIV-positive women. If you become pregnant, medication can keep you from spreading the virus to your unborn child. Eva has three healthy children. Since her diagnosis, she has become

a grandmother, gotten married and enrolled in college to study nursing. "Finding out you're HIV-positive isn't the end," she says. For more information for the newly diagnosed go to thebody.com.

Q If I practice safe sex, must I reveal my HIV-positive status to the man I'm dating?

A If you are having sex, you must reveal your status to your partner. As Kym points out, "My husband kept his status from me. I know what it's like to feel

like you don't have a choice." Still, Kym doesn't tell every man she dates her status. "If we aren't going to be intimate, I don't think he needs to know," she says. If the relationship progresses and sex seems on the horizon, Kym sits her man down for The Talk. "It might not happen on the first date or maybe even the fifth date, but before we have sex I say, 'I want you to know I am HIV-positive and this is how I became infected.' A lot of times, it's a little step back. Then some men will ask me to educate them about the virus. Of course, if a man dumps you because of your status, he might have dumped you anyway. But you have to give him the choice. It's only fair." □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

For more info about the Empowered campaign, visit greaterthan.org/empowered.

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