

Telling others about your HIV



Telling others you have HIV can be a scary experience. But it could also feel freeing and even improve your intimacy with others. In the long run, it's usually not as hard as the heavy burden of keeping it secret. While there's no one best way to disclose your status, there are a few things to think about ahead of time that might help.

Weighing the pros and cons

Common reasons why some people choose not to disclose is that others may find it hard to accept their HIV status or may even discriminate against them. Discrimination within one's family or friends can really hurt. Discrimination at work can hurt too, but it's also illegal.

The pros are that sharing your status can feel empowering and can foster a new sense of closeness among friends, family and loved ones. Not hiding your status from doctors or other health providers can help ensure that you get the most appropriate care. Disclosure can also reduce the risk of passing HIV onto others, and it can lead to better, healthier sexual relationships.

Who to tell

Remember, you don't have to tell everyone, only those who you trust and want or need to tell. Give yourself time to determine who they are and how you want to tell them.

Sometimes it's easier to disclose first to someone who has been through it themselves, like a friend or family member living with HIV or members of a support group or someone who has disclosed another serious illness.

If you don't know anyone like this, or can't get to a support group, calling an HIV hotline and telling an operator you have HIV can break the ice. They're used to these kinds of calls and won't judge you. They might even be willing to work *with* you—through role-play or just by listening—to help you find the words and courage to tell others.

Tell friends and family

Healthy disclosure is a process that may require many discussions. Think of disclosing your HIV as the begin-

ning of new dialogues with others. Not only will they learn about you through this process, but you'll learn a lot about yourself as well. The starting point may be your saying, "I have something to tell you—I have HIV." Chances are, that isn't going to be the final word.

Think about where you want to tell—a place where you feel comfortable and safe. If possible, line up a place safe for you to go after the initial disclosure, like a friend's house or a support group.

Consider bringing a few pamphlets about HIV or a hotline card for the person you're telling. They might want to use these resources later. Also, consider bringing someone who already knows you have HIV, which can be great support for you as you talk.

Remember, their first reaction is not going to be their last. Like you, those who you care about need time to adjust to this new information. Be brave and proud of the decision you've made!

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Telling children

If you have kids, telling your children about your or their HIV status can be even more challenging, but also rewarding. Like other touchy topics—such as bodies, puberty and sex—discussions about HIV, be it your own, their HIV or HIV in general, should be age appropriate. “Women, Children and HIV” has great information for parents who need guidance on disclosure, available at www.womenchildrenhiv.org.



Telling employers

You don't have to tell your employer you have HIV. Having confidential medical information is part of your right to privacy. The only situation you may need to reveal your status is on the application for Family and Medical Leave, which must remain in a private file to which only the director of human resources or you have access. If it is shared with anyone else and discrimination results, the employee could sue the employer. Before disclosing to an employer for benefits purposes, contact a benefits counselor or legal advocate before disclosing.



Other resources

Women, Children and HIV
www.womenchildrenhiv.org
AIDS Legal Referral Panel
www.alrp.org



FACING NEW DECISIONS? WONDERING WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?
National HIV Treatment Hotline: 1-800-822-7422 (toll-free)
10a–4p, Monday–Friday, Pacific Time