Everyone's experience is different. Many people find it difficult to come to terms with their diagnosis but some people living with HIV feel empowered by their HIV status and many people actually look after themselves, eat better and lead a healthier lifestyle after receiving an HIV diagnosis.

Although excellent treatments are available and most people on HIV treatment now just take one or two pills a day, they may experience side effects such as nausea, diarrhoea, weight loss and changes in body shape. Relationships can be difficult to begin or maintain as some people feel unable to cope with having an HIV positive partner. Mental health can also be affected as people living with HIV come to terms with their diagnosis and other people’s reactions.

However, many people living with HIV continue to lead active and fulfilling lives – and they can work, have relationships and have children.

If someone has told you they are HIV positive they may be placing a lot of trust in you. It is very important that you respect this and don’t pass on this information without their permission.

There is no need to treat someone living with HIV any differently to how you treat anyone else and your reaction can make a big difference to how they feel about their HIV status. If the person with HIV is a sexual partner you should make sure you use a condom to protect yourself from HIV infection.

Remember, under the Equality Act (2010), it is illegal to discriminate against someone because they are HIV positive.

For further information visit www.hivaware.org.uk

Find out the facts about HIV and how you can act aware at www.hivaware.org.uk

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HIV is a virus that attacks the body’s immune system - the body’s defence against diseases. A person with HIV is considered to have AIDS when the immune system is so weak it can no longer fight off a range of diseases that it would normally cope with.

There are effective treatments available that can keep the virus under control and the immune system healthy. So long as they are diagnosed early and receive treatment, most people will not develop AIDS.

No, there is no cure for HIV. Once a person becomes infected with HIV they will have the virus for the rest of their life. But people on HIV treatment can live healthy, active lives. It diagnosed early, a person living with HIV in the UK can expect a near-normal life span.

HIV can be passed on through infected semen, vaginal and anal fluid secretions, blood and breast milk. The most common ways HIV is passed on are:

- Anal or vaginal sex without a condom. (95% of people diagnosed with HIV in the UK last year were infected through sexual contact.)
- Sharing infected needles, syringes or other drug injecting equipment.
- From an HIV positive mother to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. (However, there are steps mothers can take to reduce this possibility and in the UK only 1 in 100 babies born to HIV positive mothers have HIV.)

Oral sex carries a much lower risk than penetrative sex, but HIV can still be passed on if the person performing oral sex has cuts, bleeding gums or ulcers in their mouth which come into contact with infected bodily fluids.

HIV is not passed on through:

- Kissing or touching
- Spitting, coughing or sneezing
- Shared facilities such as toilet seats or swimming pools
- Biting
- Coming into contact with a discarded needle
- Shared’ glasses, cups or utensils

If you are sexually active or use needles or other injecting equipment you could be at risk of HIV.

Always use a condom when having vaginal or anal sex. A condom is the best way to prevent HIV infection during sexual intercourse.

You may also want to use a condom or dental dam when performing oral sex although the risk of transmission of HIV is much lower. Always follow the instructions for use and use a condom that meets the British Standard and carries the Kitemark symbol. You can get free condoms from a sexual health clinic, which you can locate at www.fpa.org.uk/Findaclinic

Never share needles, or any other injecting equipment.

70-90% of people with HIV experience symptoms soon after infection (1-2 weeks). The most common symptoms are severe flu-like symptoms and include a fever, rash on the chest and sore throat - all occurring together. This combination is unusual in an otherwise healthy person and indicates the need for an HIV test. These symptoms disappear after two to three weeks and then a person can appear healthy for many years.

Not everybody experiences symptoms of early HIV infection, so never assume you don’t have HIV just because you do not experience symptoms.

If you think you have put yourself at risk of HIV, you should take an HIV test.

If it is under 72 hours since possible exposure to HIV you can ask for Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) - a course of medication which may stop you from becoming infected - from a sexual health clinic or A&E Department.

If you are unsure whether you’ve put yourself at risk, take our online quiz at www.HIVaware.org.uk

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