BEING POSITIVE
LIVING WITH HIV

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Contents

Acknowledgements 7
What can you do? 8
Two things you may want to consider 8
How the virus is spread 8
Your own health 8
Time to adjust 10
Who needs to know? 11
Telling others 13
Looking after yourself 14
Food safety 16
Drugs, alcohol and tobacco 17
Treatment 19
Sex 20
  Oral sex 22
  Condoms 22
  Safer sex - Talking it through 24
  Choose the right time 25
  Be straightforward 25
Contraception 26
Pregnancy and children 26
Living with other people 28
Blood or organ donation 30
Practical matters 30
Being positive 31
Contact numbers 32
  Contraception and pregnancy 37
  Drug issues 38
  Travelling abroad 39
You have been found to have antibodies to HIV (the Human Immunodeficiency virus).

What can you do?

You may have many questions about what being ‘antibody positive’ (HIV positive) means. This booklet gives some basic information, and suggests ways of helping you to live well and stay healthy, despite having the virus. But reading this is not the same as talking over your concerns with another person. Your next step might be to talk to someone who knows about HIV – this may be a health adviser, doctor, counsellor, or someone from the many support and self-help organisations (for details of these see pages 32 to 38). Health advisers and doctors at NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics offer advice and a completely confidential service about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. To find the addresses of clinics in your area, ring the National AIDS Helpline on 0800 567 123. This is a free, confidential 24-hour service. You can also find information about clinics on the sexual health website www.lovelife.uk.com.
Two things you may want to consider

- The best way to maintain or improve your health.
- How you can make sure you do not pass on HIV.

How the virus is spread

The virus is spread mainly in one of three ways:
- by having vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV, unprotected oral sex also carries some risk;
- from a mother to her unborn child, at birth or through breastfeeding; or
- by sharing drug-injecting equipment, such as needles and syringes.

The virus cannot be passed on through touching, shaking hands or hugging, so coming into contact with someone with HIV is perfectly safe.

Your own health

HIV can weaken your body’s defence system — that is, your body’s ability to fight off infection. If your defence system is damaged in this way, certain infections, which you would normally be able to shake off, can become very serious. Being HIV positive means that you have been infected with HIV. When you first become infected with the virus, you may not look or feel any different. You can have the virus without having any symptoms or illnesses. But you can still pass on the virus.

Being HIV positive does not mean that you have AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). You may be perfectly healthy and go on feeling well for many years. At the moment nobody can be certain for how long but, with new treatments, people with HIV are living longer. A doctor will only diagnose AIDS if you develop certain infections or cancers. One of the most common of these infections is a type of pneumonia.

HIV might also affect your health in the following ways:
- You may feel generally unwell, tired or exhausted.
- You may have fevers and night sweats.
- You may have skin problems.
- You may get diarrhoea.
- You may lose weight for no obvious reason.
- You may get mouth infections.

Any of these problems can have other causes and may be nothing to do with