

Recently diagnosed?

Taking an HIV test and learning that you are HIVpositive can be a daunting, shattering experience. Though it may be hard to think in such terms at the time of testing, knowledge of a positive test result may extend your life.

You now have the opportunity to take advantage of regular medical monitoring and the many medical advances that have occurred recently. Whilst your HIV infection goes undiagnosed, the virus nevertheless continues to damage your immune system. For many people, this has led to serious illness which may have been avoidable.

Day one

Most testing services offer pre- and post test counselling. If, however, you feel like you need ongoing support, ask at your clinic where such help is available. Support comes in many forms: telephone helplines like 93 302 04 11 and 93 441 29 97, will be able to provide you with a list of organisations that provide help. Many of the HIV centres around the country offer one-to-one counselling free of charge.

Making decisions

The time of diagnosis is probably a difficult time for you to be making important decisions about the future. This may involve anything from starting anti-HIV treatments to disclosing your status to close friends or family. Few people need to begin HIV treatment at this point - though people who are diagnosed very soon after infection may be in a special position regarding this question. Instead it is more likely that you will begin regular monitoring of your health to give you a better understanding about how your body is coping with HIV.

Medical care

Finding a clinic that meets your needs and a doctor with whom you feel comfortable is vital. You are under no obligation to continue your care at the centre where you took your HIV test. Also, you are entitled to access care from any HIV centre in the country, not just the one in the area where you live.

Some people prefer larger centres, while others prefer smaller more informal clinics. It's generally agreed, though, that being cared for by a doctor who is experienced in managing HIV disease is very important.

Once you have chosen a clinic, you'll probably be asked to attend every three months for a check-up. At these appointments you'll be able to discuss your health with your doctor and take monitoring tests called CD4 and viral load tests. These are used to predict your risk of developing illness

in the future, and to help you think about when to start anti-HIV drugs.

If you begin treatment, or if your HIV disease is more advanced, or if you join a clinical trial, you may visit your clinic more often.

Learning about HIV

At first, you are likely to come across medical terms you are unfamiliar with. Don't worry - there are lots of good sources of information which you may pursue at your own pace.

Learning about HIV will help you to take control of your health and to ask your doctor more relevant questions. It's important to watch for outdated information, and to seek advice from a range of sources: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, HIV services. Always ask for written information if you are left with questions. The internet can be a very useful information source. If you are unsure where to begin, or are worried about the quality of the information that you may find there, begin with www.gtt-vih.org from gTt.

Disclosure

Take time to decide who to tell about your HIV diagnosis, and why; and plan how you are going to tell them. What kind of support do you want from them? Can you anticipate their best or worst reaction? Begin with those around you who are most likely to be supportive, and consider waiting to tell anyone, e.g. an employer, whose reaction may not be helpful.

Meeting people

Meeting other HIV-positive people can be a remarkably supportive experience. If there's an HIV centre locally, it may have a support group aimed at people who are newly diagnosed. Here you'll meet people with a range of experiences, who are likely to have faced similar issues to you in coming to terms with their diagnosis.