

Positive Prevention Intervention Center
SANKOFA FACT SHEET

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What are HIV+ Persons' HIV Prevention Needs?

Why prevention for HIV+ persons?

Every new HIV infection involves an HIV+ person. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that there are 600,000 - 900,000 people living with HIV in the US. Yet very few prevention interventions have been directed to HIV+ women and men. People who are HIV+ deserve to have interventions to help them stay safe and play an active role in stopping the epidemic.

In the past few years, advances in the treatment and care of HIV+ persons have helped many people enjoy increased health and longer life. For many, this allows for a renewed interest in sexual and for some, drug-using activity. More sexually active and drug-using HIV+ persons means the possibility of more new infections.

Why haven't we done more of this?

In the past, prevention efforts had not been directed toward HIV+ persons for fear of "pointing the finger" or blaming HIV+ persons for the epidemic. Although AIDS has become less stigmatized in the US, in some communities there is still serious stigma experienced by HIV+ persons. AIDS activists and HIV+ persons have also feared laws criminalizing sexual risk behaviors and further prosecution of injection drug users (IDUs).

Prevention efforts for HIV+ persons have focused on protecting one's own health from the possibility of reinfection with untreatable strains of HIV. Few efforts have addressed altruism - the responsibility of HIV+ persons to not transmit the virus to others and the opportunity for HIV+ persons to actively contribute to ending the epidemic. Prevention efforts need to address both issues: taking responsibility for one's own health and the health of one's partners, children, other family members and community.



Why would someone infect another?

Most HIV+ persons are concerned about not infecting others and have made efforts to prevent transmission. Yet there has not been much support for HIV+ persons to gain the necessary skills and tools to adopt new, safer behaviors. Couples where one partner is HIV+ and the other is HIV- often wrestle with issues such as how to maintain sexual satisfaction and trust. For some couples, the risk of losing commitment and intimacy in a relationship is more threatening than the risk of transmitting HIV.

A precondition of reducing your risk is knowing you're HIV+ and getting help. There are an estimated 200,000 - 250,000 Americans unaware that they are infected with HIV. It is imperative to help HIV+ persons get tested before they unknowingly infect others. Finding out HIV status can also allow early access to life-prolonging treatment and services.

Incorrect assumptions and denial of responsibility between partners can lead to risky behavior. Many HIV- persons are unaware of their partners' status or risk behaviors and may make assumptions that they are not at risk for HIV because they are married, in a relationship, their partner looks healthy, or simply because their partner did not ask to use a condom. HIV+ persons may make the same assumptions that their partner is also HIV+ because the partner didn't ask about serostatus or suggest using condoms. Likewise, there may be a difference of opinion on who's responsible for keeping safe, the HIV+ person, the HIV- person, or both.

Disclosure can be a way of beginning a discussion about safer sex or drug use. Yet disclosure of one's serostatus is difficult for many HIV+ persons, especially women, who may fear stigma, rejection or violence from their partners. Practicing safer sex with all partners and always using clean needles is one way of preventing transmission without having to disclose status. However, in many communities where this is not the norm, simply using a condom can disclose HIV+ status, even without saying it.

Source: <http://www.caps.ucsf.edu/poz.html>

