

what are HIV+ persons' HIV prevention needs?

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do HIV+ persons need prevention?

Yes. Over 1 million persons in the US are living with HIV/AIDS.¹ Advances in the early diagnosis, treatment and care of HIV+ persons have helped many people enjoy increased health and longer life. Some HIV+ persons have experienced a renewed interest in sexual or drug-using activity. This can place them at risk for acquiring additional STD infections and for transmitting HIV to their uninfected partners.² Many HIV+ persons, therefore, require programs to help them stay safe.

Most HIV+ persons are concerned about not infecting others and make efforts to prevent transmission.³ However, a significant percentage of HIV+ persons struggle with prevention: from 20-50% of HIV+ persons report unprotected sex with partners who are HIV- or whose HIV status they do not know.⁴ For many HIV+ persons, the same structural, inter-personal and behavioral challenges that put them at risk for HIV persist beyond their HIV diagnosis and play a role in their inability to prevent HIV transmission.⁴

Prevention with HIV+ persons may include education and skills building interventions, efforts to test more persons who are HIV+ but do not know their status, support and testing for partners of HIV+ persons and integrating prevention into routine medical care.⁵

how is it different?

HIV prevention programs with HIV+ persons are different than programs with HIV- persons in that they must address clinical, mental and social support needs as well as build skills to prevent HIV transmission to current and future partners.

***Stigma.** Pre-existing stigma towards gay men, women, drug users, sex workers and persons of color has helped fuel the HIV epidemic in this country by creating social conditions that foster HIV transmission.⁶ Added to this is the additional stigma of living with HIV. Previous experience of stigma (coming out as gay or as a drug user) may lead to trauma that impacts the ability to cope with HIV transmission.⁷ It is important to address these structural factors to build strength and resiliency in HIV+ communities.*

Disclosure. One of the foremost concerns for HIV+ persons is how, when, where and to whom to disclose their HIV status.⁸ The traditional message has been that HIV+ persons should always disclose their HIV status to partners. In reality, disclosure is complex and difficult. Some HIV+ persons decide not to disclose and not engage in risk behavior. HIV+ persons often fear that disclosure may bring partner or familial rejection, limit sexual opportunities or increase risk for physical and sexual violence. A survey of HIV+ persons found that 42% of gay men, 19% of heterosexual men and 17% of women had sex without disclosing their HIV status.⁹ HIV+ persons may disclose differently with doctors, family, friends, work colleagues and sexual and injecting partners.

***Responsibility.** Persons with HIV live with both the experience of being infected (sometimes by someone they love and trust) and the tremendous responsibility of knowing that they can infect other people. Although the subject of responsibility is complex, prevention programs can provide support to HIV+ persons to explore and understand what it means for them individually.¹⁰*

what can HIV+ persons do?

Many HIV+ persons are using strategies that limit HIV transmission. One strategy is having sex mainly with other known HIV+ persons.¹¹ Knowing that your sexual partner is also HIV+ avoids the risk of transmission and allows for sex without consistent condom use. There have been recent concerns about superinfection among HIV+ couples, where one HIV+ person might acquire another strain of HIV from their HIV+ partner. However, superinfection among such couples appears to be rare.¹²

Another strategy is switching from high-risk to lower risk activities. HIV+ persons can avoid high-risk activities such as being an insertive partner (top) during anal and vaginal sex, having sex while menstruating, breastfeeding and sharing syringes. Lower risk activities can be having oral sex and being a receptive partner (bottom).¹¹

Says who?

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what can my agency/clinic do?

HIV+ persons are a diverse group and require prevention programs that fit their specific needs. Programs need to see the whole person, not just sex and drug use. Relationships, employment, healthcare, housing, stigma and discrimination should be addressed as needed. Listening to HIV+ persons and involving them in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs ensures that programs are relevant and useful.¹³

Prevention programs with HIV+ persons can require institutional change and adjustment for agencies and clinics that may be integrating care and prevention services for the first time. Healthcare clinics may train providers and staff to deliver prevention counseling, link with prevention and social service agencies or provide referrals to agencies. Prevention programs may train staff in treatment and care issues, forge relationships with clinics and service agencies or provide referrals.

It is critical for healthcare providers to maintain a non-judgmental tone about situations and behaviors with HIV+ clients.¹⁴ It is equally important to work in collaboration with HIV+ persons to develop a concrete risk reduction plan based on the client's needs and abilities.¹³ Providers should be supportive, empathic, goal-oriented and focus on a client's strengths and resiliencies. Prevention programs need to provide clients with the knowledge, skills and resources (such as condoms, clean needles and a plan to decrease alcohol and drug use) to put the risk reduction plan in place.

what's being done?

There are currently many programs and interventions addressing prevention with HIV+ persons in service agency and clinical settings across the US. The following programs are part of the CDC's Replicating Effective Programs initiative.¹⁵

Healthy Relationships is a five-session risk-reduction group intervention for men and women. The program focuses on developing decision-making and problem-solving skills for making informed and safe decisions about disclosure and behavior. The groups allow HIV+ persons to interact, examine their risks, develop skills to reduce their risks and receive feedback from others. Participants reported significantly less unprotected intercourse and greater condom use at six-month follow-up.¹⁶

Choosing Life: Empowerment, Action, Results (CLEAR) offers HIV+ youth 18 one-on-one 90-minute sessions with a counselor. CLEAR seeks to build motivation and enhance self-esteem so that youth can learn to choose healthy activities over self-destructive behaviors. CLEAR is divided into three modules: substance use, sexual decision-making and self care. Youth also can choose telephone sessions instead of in person sessions. Youth participating reported having fewer sexual partners, using fewer drugs and feeling less emotional distress.¹⁷ CLEAR is now known as Street Smart.

Partnership for Health trained staff in HIV medical clinics to provide brief, safer-sex counseling supplemented by written information and clinic posters. The program found that counseling emphasizing the negative consequences of unsafe sex helped reduce risk behaviors with patients who reported 2 or more partners.¹⁸

what needs to be done?

Prevention programs with HIV+ persons need to pay attention to structural barriers to safer sexual and drug use behavior. For some HIV+ persons, barriers may include housing instability, lack of access to HIV care and repeated incarceration. The challenges of sexual and drug risk behavior, disclosure and responsibility need to be placed in social and structural contexts that are meaningful to HIV+ persons.

There is a need to further examine how early childhood and adult trauma, sexual abuse, coming out, racism and homophobia affect an HIV+ person's ability to maintain safer behaviors. More emphasis should be placed on couples and sexual partners, both in research and in prevention programs, because sexual risk behavior among HIV+ persons is often a shared risk decision within couples/partners.¹⁹

Prevention with positives programs present the opportunity and challenge of forging relationships and integrating services in areas that have not traditionally worked together. Treatment, prevention and social services need to work in tandem, helping clients deal with the multiple issues they may face. Involving HIV+ persons is key.

PREPARED BY KELLY KNIGHT MED AND CAROL DAWSON-ROSE RN PHD, CAPS

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