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HIV: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

If you, or someone you know, have been diagnosed with HIV/ Aids, you may be wondering how to handle the diagnosis. Here are the answers to some common questions.

According to 2019 stats by Avert, South Africa has the biggest HIV epidemic in the world, with 7.5 million people living with HIV.

However, most sufferers aren't comfortable sharing their status because of the stigma attached to the virus. It's important to offer support and educate yourself on the true facts about HIV/Aids. You can start by reading the information below.

Q: WHAT IS HIV AND HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM AIDS?

A: Educational website [Avert](#) defines the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) as 'a virus that attacks the immune system, which is our body's natural defence against illness'. This virus spreads by destroying cells called T-helper or CD4 cells in our bodies

and replacing them with copies of the virus itself. Aids (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) refers to the symptoms caused by HIV. Early symptoms include:

- Body rash
- Recurring fever
- Sore throat
- Swollen glands
- Headache
- Upset stomach
- Joint aches and muscle pain

Q: WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT I HAVE HIV/AIDS?

A: [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) suggests that everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 years be tested at least once. You should have more regular tests if you are sexually active or inject drugs, or have been diagnosed with another sexually transmitted



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disease, hepatitis or tuberculosis.

The healthcare provider who administers the test will ask you a few questions before your test and obtain your consent to do the test. He or she will share your result with you and explain what it means, and they'll have a post-counselling session with you (regardless of your result).

If you test positive, the first step is to see a doctor, who will give you a complete examination and most likely prescribe antiretroviral treatment (ART), which you will have to start immediately. These medications lower the quantity of the virus found in your body, which slows the progression of the illness and improves your immunity. Being HIV positive doesn't mean you have Aids. Aids is an advanced stage of HIV.

Q: CAN I GET HIV/AIDS BY SHARING A TOILET OR GLASS WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS THE DISEASE?

A: No. The CDC clearly states that HIV cannot be transmitted by air, water, saliva, sweat, tears, closedmouth kissing, insects or pets, or sharing toilets, food or drinks.

You can get infected with HIV only through:

- Certain bodily fluids, such as blood, semen, preseminal fluid, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids and breast milk from someone who has the virus.
- These fluids must come into contact with the mucous membrane or damaged tissue in your body, or be injected directly into your bloodstream. This makes sexual activity and injection drug use two of the top transmitters of HIV.
- Less commonly, it can be spread from a mother to her child during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Healthcare workers should also take particular care as they could come into contact with HIV-contaminated needles.

Q: DO I HAVE TO DISCLOSE MY HIV STATUS TO MY EMPLOYER?

A: The South African Labour Guide acknowledges that the workplace could be affected due to absenteeism and illness. However, as with any other illness, you don't have to share your status with your employer, and your employer may not request that you do an HIV test. The Labour Guide recommends that companies put an HIV/Aids policy in place to address issues that may arise from an employee being diagnosed with HIV. This policy should eliminate unfair discrimination, provide a safe space where people with HIV/Aids don't have to fear rejection, and create a balance of the rights and responsibilities of all parties.

Employers should consider the following legislation when drawing up their policy:

- Employment Equity Act, 1998 – addresses discrimination
- Labour Relations Act, 1995 – deals with employment issues and authorised testing
- Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993 and Mine Health and Safety Act No. 29 of 1996 – provide guidelines for creating a safe working space
- Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases – tells the employer what to do if an employee contracts HIV while in their employ
- Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 1997 – states that all employees must receive certain basic standards of employment, including sick leave

Q: WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT A FRIEND, COLLEAGUE OR FAMILY MEMBER WHO HAS HIV/AIDS?

A: Show them love and respect, learn more about HIV/Aids and talk to them about the disease. Reduce stressful situations, and encourage them to take care of themselves by eating healthy food, getting enough sleep

and taking their medication.

Q: WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOMEONE WHO HAS HIV/AIDS?

A: There is limited data surrounding HIV and COVID-19, but according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people with HIV who are on effective treatment have the same risk as people who don't have HIV. However, because HIV-infected people have weakened immune systems, it's even more important for them to take preventive measures such as social distancing, wearing a mask and regular handwashing with soap and water. They should also maintain a healthy lifestyle by getting enough sleeping, following a healthy diet and reducing stress.

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The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a professional. E&OE.



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