

# Talking with your partners is an act of caring and concern

Telling a sex partner or needle-sharing partner that you are HIV-positive can be hard to do. The following information helps you think about how to tell your partners they may have been exposed to HIV.

## Ways to inform partners

You need to decide how to tell your partners that they may have been exposed. In most cases, there are four choices:

- A specially trained person from a local health department provides HIV Partner Services (PS) and can tell your partners without using your name or identifying you.
- You can tell your partners by yourself.
- You can tell your partners yourself with a PS counselor present.
- You can attempt to tell your partners yourself and, if unsuccessful, have a PS counselor do it.

You may prefer having a PS counselor notify your partners. This may be better than telling people yourself because:

- It might be more than you want to do alone.
- It can take a long time, especially when you need to tell a number of partners.
- You have less control over your confidentiality.
- You may find it hard to explain HIV infection and to answer partners' questions. An experienced PS counselor can usually explain things much easier than someone doing this for the first time.
- Despite your good intentions, a bad experience notifying one partner may result in you not wanting to tell other partners. A PS counselor can inform your partners without you being present. This is done without telling your partners your name. In some cases, a partner may figure out that you have HIV infection. This is especially true if you are your partner's only sex or needle-sharing partner.

***It is important your partners know they may have been exposed to HIV. If they are infected, they need to know so they can get proper medical care. New drugs can keep people with HIV infection healthy. Treating HIV infection very early can make a big difference. If your partners are infected, they also need to know so they can avoid passing the virus to someone else.***

The PS counselor can be with you when you talk with a partner to provide moral support, to actually tell a partner, to answer a partner's questions, or to offer testing.

If you choose to tell a partner yourself, you should plan what you will say as well as where and when to tell them. Base your plan on how you think your partner will react. Ask yourself these questions:

- Will my partner get very angry or walk away in disbelief?
- Will my partner tell others that I am HIV-positive?
- When and where should I talk to my partner -- when we are alone together at home or tonight in our favorite meeting place (a park, restaurant, shopping mall, etc.)?

By role-playing or discussing with a PS counselor your partner's possible reactions, you can come up with a plan that works best for you.

## The best way to talk

The best way to talk with your partner is face-to-face. However, that may not be possible if your partner has moved away or is living with someone else.

If your partner reacts to stressful news in destructive ways, you may feel more secure if you talk with your partner in the presence of the PS

counselor or have the PS counselor talk with your partner without you present. The PS counselor can also wait until you are in a safe place before telling your partner. This is very important if you are in an abusive relationship.

Whatever you decide about how you want to inform your partners, you should be as clear as possible if you decide to speak to them directly. For example, tell your partners that you have tested positive for HIV (that you have HIV) and that they may be infected too. Reassure your partner that being exposed to the virus doesn't always mean that he or she is infected.

Encourage your partner to seek counseling and HIV testing for the same reasons you did — to prolong your life and to keep from spreading the virus to others.

### **Planning for difficult questions**

In many cases, talking with your partner will not be exactly as you expect or as you would like. Be prepared for your partners to question you about your past — for example, they may ask if you have had several sexual partners; if you had sex with other men, women, or both men and women; or if you used drugs.

After you have thought about all of this, you may decide you do not want to do this by yourself. In that case, you can use the services of a PS counselor through your local health department.

A major benefit of using a PS counselor is that you do not have to contact persons from past relationships, and your identity is never known to your former partners. A PS counselor will only tell your partners that someone they have been with, either through a sexual or needle-sharing relationship, has tested positive for HIV. Your partners will not be given your name or any information that identifies you. The PS counselor will not tell partners how you were infected, whether you are a man or woman, or when he or she might have been exposed.

### **It is important to know**

It is important to know that many former partners want to find out who named them. Some partners, in their efforts to find this out, will call past partners and ask them why they gave their name to the health department. If you want to maintain your privacy, you need to be prepared for such a call and consider how you will answer questions like this.

The Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program believes all sex and needle sharing partners of persons with HIV infection should be told they may be at risk for HIV infection. In Wisconsin, participation in the Partner Services (PS) Program is voluntary. This means that when you are tested by your doctor and reported to the Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program, these services will be offered to you. (If you were tested anonymously and therefore not reported, you can contact your local health department to get help telling partners.) If you first decline to participate, you will be offered assistance again in six months. Everyone with HIV infection should be given several chances to use the PS Program. Participation in this program can be very helpful in contacting persons who may not know they are HIV-positive, in slowing the spread of HIV infection, and in assisting persons who are infected.

If you would like to find out more about the services discussed here, call the Wisconsin AIDS/HIV Program at 608-267-5288 or your local health department.



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