



plain and simple facts

# WOMEN'S HEALTH



## Women and HIV

### What symptoms affect women with HIV?

Women with HIV infection can experience most of the symptoms that men with HIV do. In addition, there are some HIV/AIDS-related conditions that affect only women. These can include menstrual problems, vaginal infections and more frequent diseases of the cervix, such as abnormal growths on the cervix (cervical dysplasia) and cervical cancer.

Women may also experience different effects from HIV medications than men do. In addition, there are unique concerns about pregnancy and child care that affect HIV-positive women.

### Menstrual problems

- Women with HIV may experience changes in their periods. Women may develop irregular cycles, heavier or lighter bleeding, or they may stop menstruating.
- In addition, women with HIV may experience more severe symptoms of PMS (premenstrual syndrome).

These changes may or may not be directly related to HIV infection. Many other factors, such as long-term stress, severe weight loss, long-term substance use, pregnancy, other chronic illnesses or regular use of some medications can also cause changes in menstrual periods. If you are having any of these problems, they should be checked out by your family doctor and/or a gynecologist (a doctor who specializes in women's reproductive health).

### Vaginal infections

Vaginal infections, especially yeast infections, are common in HIV-positive women. Because of the weakened immune system, some of these infections may keep coming back and may require more aggressive treatment than usual.

### Cervical dysplasia

Cervical dysplasia, an abnormal growth or change in the cells of the cervix, occurs more frequently in HIV-positive women than in HIV-negative women. This is a pre-cancerous condition that, if left untreated, may develop into cervical cancer. Fortunately, cervical dysplasia and cervical cancers are preventable. Having regular Pap smears to screen for these conditions will enable you to get treatment early.

### Effects of HIV drugs

Using an effective combination of anti-HIV medications can help reduce the amount of virus in your body (your viral load) and improve your body's ability to fight infections by strengthening your immune system. This will often lower the risk of developing infections and symptoms that are related to HIV, including menstrual problems, recurrent vaginal infections and cervical dysplasia.

On the other hand, women may experience different side effects to some of the anti-HIV medications than men, and may require different doses. Some women who take protease inhibitors notice changes to their body shape, especially breast enlargement and an increase in waist size. In addition, some anti-HIV medications may affect birth control pills. Make sure to discuss with your physician the effects of all the prescription and non-prescription drugs you are taking, including birth control pills, supplements and herbs.

## **Pregnancy concerns**

Being HIV positive does not mean you cannot have children. It also does not mean your baby will definitely be HIV positive. There are treatments that can be taken during pregnancy and/or at delivery that can reduce the risk of your baby becoming infected by the HIV virus. Please make sure to discuss your concerns with your doctor and midwife.

HIV can be spread from mother to child through breast milk, so breast-feeding is not recommended in HIV-positive women.

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**Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.**



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