



**Understanding
and accepting
my HIV status**



If you have been given this leaflet or have picked it up, it is probably because you have recently learnt you are living with HIV. We hope this leaflet will help you with understanding more about living with HIV and with thinking through some of the things you might be feeling.

Feelings

Finding out about HIV can affect people in different ways; people can feel scared, angry or confused, while others may feel relieved that they have an explanation to some of the questions they have had. Whatever you feel it is normal and it is OK.

Feelings and emotions are how we process the things that happen to us, and expressing those feelings is important, as it allows us to get answers, to get support, and to release the thoughts that can stress us.

It is likely you won't feel the same every day; some days will be better than others and it is important you find out what helps makes those days better. It might be having people around you, being involved in activities or discussions, finding out new information or time to relax and think.

If your feelings are very negative and become too much, and you feel you aren't coping, you must speak to someone. You need support!

Understanding and accepting your HIV status takes time, and you need to allow yourself this time. This leaflet is to reassure you that along this journey there are people to support you, and help you to reflect on what helps you and what others have found helpful.

HOW AM I GOING TO TELL PEOPLE?

IS IT GOING TO GET BETTER?

I FEEL SO SCARED AND LONELY.

WHY DO I HAVE TO TAKE MEDICATION?

WHAT IF PEOPLE GOSSIP ABOUT ME?

WHO DO I ASK IF I HAVE A PROBLEM?

IF ONLY I HAD SOMEONE LIKE ME TO TALK TO.





MEETING PEOPLE WITH THE SAME EXPERIENCES AND HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE LIFE EXPERIENCES, GIVES ENCOURAGEMENT AND IDEAS OF COPING BETTER.

Why is it important to know my HIV status?

It is important for everyone to know their HIV status, but for those of us who are diagnosed as HIV positive it is important because ...

- **It is our right to know about our own health** and be fully informed so we can manage things in the best way possible.
- **It is the first step to access treatment** (antiretroviral therapy or ART).



Progress in treatment means that we can now live a long and fulfilled life. Taking medication can mean we can suppress the HIV virus to levels that can't be detected, meaning we are not able to pass on the virus to anyone else.

Undetectable = Untransmittable

Finding out about my HIV status

How you found out you are living with HIV will probably depend on whether you were born with HIV or you got it later in life. If you were born with HIV it is likely family members or caregivers were already aware and have been thinking about when and how to tell you. They will have been thinking about how to talk to you depending on your age, and they may have begun the process of telling you some time ago. If you got HIV later in life then it is possible that you are the only one who knows, other than the person who counselled and tested you. It may be that you are thinking about sharing your HIV status with others.

What can I expect from my caregivers and healthcare providers?

Knowing your status is an important right. It is about you being aware, informed and in control of the decisions that affect you. Being fully informed means you can make decisions about your health, treatment and care more independently but with the support of people around you. It is therefore important that you can have all your questions answered and can get the information you need to make decisions.



It is your right to make decisions about your health, and you should be asked about what you want and how you want things to be done.

You should expect confidentiality. Your caregivers, your healthcare providers and your peer supporters are all bound by a commitment to confidentiality and should explain to you when they need to share information with others and ask for your consent or permission.

You should expect support. You should not have to manage this alone or manage it quickly.

You should expect honest and accurate information and answers to your questions.

You should expect to be linked and connected to people who can help you – whether that is doctors to talk about medication, CATS and other peers to help you with sharing your HIV status with others, or support for other issues.



JOINING A SUPPORT GROUP WAS THE GREATEST THING EVER TO HAPPEN TO ME.

THE SUPPORT GROUP AUNT WAS VERY AMAZING. SHE WELCOMED ME AND MADE ME FEEL I REALLY BELONGED THERE.

Acceptance

Understanding about HIV and accepting your HIV status is a process that is different for each person. You may experience lots of emotions and have many questions. Some people may worry about what others might say, some may have concerns about other family members or sharing information with people. There is no single story; all our experiences are different, but for each of us it is about finding the right support and understanding.

For some people, acceptance comes from finding inner strength to cope and is a very private process. For others it is about the support of people around them, learning about HIV and understanding what happens next. Take your time and find your own path and your own support.



Asking questions

You will have lots of questions and will need information to help you understand more about living with HIV. Your questions are important. Some people might find it difficult to answer your questions, especially parents or caregivers. They may be dealing with their own feelings of anxiety about your well-being or they may not be informed themselves and still have their own questions that need answering. It is important to find people who can talk openly and honestly with you; this may be family members, healthcare providers, CATS or other peers.

Telling others

Knowing your HIV status is one step, but for many the next step is knowing how to tell others; this might be family, friends or partners. Telling people you are living with HIV can be very difficult as you don't know how different people will react. The most important thing is that it is **your** decision if and when you tell someone. There should be no pressure on you. If you would like to read more about sharing your status with others read our leaflet 'Telling others about my HIV status'.



READY+ aims to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), psychological wellbeing, care and treatment with, by and for 30,000 adolescents and young people living with HIV in Mozambique, eSwatini, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. The programme is being implemented by an innovative and multi-disciplinary consortium of youth, SRHR, HIV and communication partners. READY+ is one of a portfolio of projects being implemented under the READY programme.

For more information, visit <https://frontlineaids.org/our-work-includes/ready/>