

Disclosing HIV status to healthcare workers

Last updated September 2012/ Due for review September 2014

In the UK, it is almost certain that you will receive your HIV care from a specialist HIV clinic. It's equally likely that from time to time you will use non-HIV services for your health care. This factsheet provides some information on why it can be a good idea to tell other healthcare professionals, such as GPs, dentists and pharmacists, that you have HIV.

GPs

Everyone living with HIV in the UK is advised to register with a GP. The doctor will be able to provide the most appropriate care if they know about any conditions you have or any medication you are taking. It therefore makes good sense to tell your GP that you have HIV. It is particularly important if you are taking HIV treatment, because there are interactions between some anti-HIV drugs and drugs used to treat other conditions (and contraceptives).

If you are worried about discrimination, it is good to know that GPs are not allowed to refuse to register you because you are HIV-positive, or treat you differently because you are HIV positive or because of your race or sexuality.

Some people are concerned that telling their GP they have HIV could have implications if they apply for life assurance. Your GP records are confidential, but it is true that if you apply for life cover the company will almost certainly ask about your medical history and ask for a report from your GP. You should be aware, however, that if you fail to tell a life insurance company that you are HIV positive it could have very serious consequences later. However, in the UK, life insurance is not usually required when applying for a mortgage, as was previously the case.

Your HIV clinic may have a list of recommended GPs in your area.

You can tell your GP you have HIV when you first register with the practice, or you could tell them later. You may decide to make an appointment to talk about HIV, or you could let them know when you go to see them about something else.

Other hospital-based specialists

If you are referred to see another specialist doctor, then it makes good sense to let that doctor know that you have HIV. This will mean that they will be able to provide you with the most appropriate care.

Similarly, if you are admitted to hospital, you should think about letting the healthcare team responsible for your care know that you have HIV.

It's a good idea to make sure that your HIV doctor knows about any other specialist care that you are receiving.

Dentists

When you register with a dentist you will be asked to fill out a form describing your medical history. This will ask you if you are HIV positive and if you have certain other illnesses such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

According to the British Dental Association, the professional body for UK dentists, a dentist should not discriminate against you because you disclose your HIV status. Sadly this has not always been the case. Dentists have sometimes claimed that this is to protect themselves and their other patients from HIV. This is not acceptable. Standard sterilisation and infection control procedures are sufficient to ensure there is no risk to dental staff or other patients.

Telling your dentist you have HIV can have benefits. For example, they can know to check for certain mouth and gum problems that occur more often in people with HIV. Also, it is wise to tell your dentist if you are taking HIV treatment or medicines for any other infections as dentists may need to use drugs that could interact with them.

If you are worried about telling a dentist, then ask your HIV clinic if they can recommend one.

Your dental records are confidential.

Pharmacists

A pharmacist may ask you what medicines you are taking when they dispense a prescription or when you buy over-the-counter medication. Some over-the-counter medicines (medicines available without a doctor's prescription), for example some hayfever tablets, can interact with certain anti-HIV drugs. It can be especially hard to maintain your confidentiality at a high street pharmacy counter, so if you do need over-the-counter medicines on a regular basis it might be wise to discuss this with your HIV doctor or specialist HIV pharmacist. They may be able to prescribe them.

If you are worried about mentioning the name of your medicines in a public place, it might be helpful to remember that most people won't recognise the names of individual anti-HIV drugs.

You could ask to talk to the pharmacist in a private area (often a pharmacy will have a private consulting room) or you could write down the name of the medicines you are taking and hand them to the pharmacist.

Complementary health practitioners

Many people with HIV use complementary therapies such as acupuncture. You may wish to disclose your health status to the therapist. It should not make a difference to the kind of therapy they offer you.

However, complementary practitioners are not as well regulated as medical professionals. You may wish to check confidentiality policies before disclosing any health details.

If you are advised to take any complementary or alternative therapy check with your doctor or HIV pharmacist that it is safe for you to do so. Some alternative medicines such as the herbal anti-depressant St John's wort can stop some anti-HIV drugs working properly. Even if you tell a complementary practitioner that you are taking anti-HIV drugs they are not guaranteed to know of any dangerous interactions.