

# Disclosing HIV status to healthcare workers

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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 have to 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

Everybody who is HIV-positive is advised to register with a GP. Your doctor will be able to provide the most appropriate care if they know about any serious illnesses that you have or any medication you are taking. It therefore makes good sense to tell your GP that you have HIV.

If you are worried about stigma and discrimination, it good to know that GPs are not allowed to refuse to register you because you are HIV-positive, or discriminate against you in any way because you are HIV-positive or because of your race, sexuality, sex or lifestyle.

Some people are concerned that informing their GP that 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 to have access to your GP records. 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.

## 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 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 that no patient poses a 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 can 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 don't have a clue what the names of individual anti-HIV drugs are.

You could ask to talk to the pharmacist in a private area (often 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.