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# Getting Your Sexy On!! [1]

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- *Do you tire of all the safer sex [2] messages and wonder where the sexy went in sex?*
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You are not alone! Living with HIV (HIV+) can definitely take the fun and pleasure out of sex. Many HIV+ women struggle in one way or another with intimacy after being diagnosed ? whether it be with stigma [3], fear of transmission [4], HIV drug side effects [5], body image issues, or just overall health (for more about issues regarding HIV and intimacy, please scroll down).

So what?s a woman to do? Despite these challenges, it IS possible to be a sexy, HIV+ woman, to have a satisfying sexual life, and to get your sexy on! What you need is a little *sex-esteem*?

## A Few Tips to Boost Your Sex-Esteem!

### What is sexy?

How do you know someone is sexy?? Is it based on their physical appearance, their youth, their vitality, or how they dress? Generally, someone?s sexiness is a complex thing that includes all aspects of a person and is not just about physical features. That is a good thing, because no human body is without flaws, and all bodies change with age.

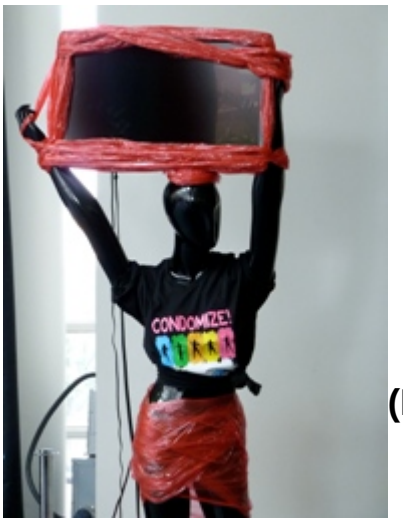
Sexiness is just as much about a person?s attitude, personality, or values as it is about physical characteristics. No matter what anyone else may say or do, your attitude and your perception of yourself are yours and yours alone. In other words, you are sexy if you **believe** you are sexy!

Yes, you may be living with HIV, but that does not make you any less worthy of respect, love, or affection. HIV may challenge your body?s immune system, but it is not necessary for it to steal your sexiness or your confidence. Nor is an HIV diagnosis a reason to expect less than anyone else would in a relationship. Being sexy is not about something you do or a certain way you look ? it is about feeling good and being fully alive within yourself.

### What is sex?

Have you ever thought about what ?having sex? means? Does it mean vaginal-penile penetration (intercourse)? Does it mean having an orgasm? Although sexual desire and arousal often lead to intercourse and/or orgasm, these are not the defining components of a satisfying sexual encounter. Sex can also include emotional intimacy, sharing fantasies,

?talking dirty? or whispering ?sweet nothings,? ?petting? (sensual touch), sharing the warm waters of a bath or shower, and kissing. The more broadly you define ?sex,? the more things can bring you sexual pleasure and satisfaction.




## (Re-)discover pleasure!

The key to having pleasurable, enjoyable sex is knowing what feels good to you. Pleasure is different for everyone, and can involve all the senses ? sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. For some, what sets the mood and comes before any physical contact is just as important as the physical, sexual contact itself. Some women prefer to learn what they find pleasurable while being sexually active with themselves (masturbation), while others like to learn what feels good in the company of another. Regardless, it is important to find out what excites you, what turns you on, and what you are willing to do (or not!). You may find that what feels good to you changes over time.

Once you know what you like, it helps to be able to say it to your partner. Something as simple as ?I like this,? or ?that feels good? can greatly enhance your sexual pleasure with a partner. If you feel safe, you may also find it helpful to talk openly with your partner about how it feels to be sexual while living with HIV. This can enhance your connection to and deepen your intimacy with your partner ? and these in turn can help ?light the fire? between you.

It is also important to find out what feels good to your partner(s). Giving pleasure is as much a part of sex as receiving it, and finding out what your partner likes sexually gives you an opportunity to talk about how to have pleasurable, protected sex. Many women find that when they feel confident being sexual, they enjoy sex more. Part of this confidence comes from not only knowing what feels good to you and your partner, but also understanding how to practice safer sex [2] and have it feel good. There?s a lot more room for pleasure when worry and fear about spreading HIV have been addressed. Safer, smarter sex can be fun and erotic. The trick is to pair protection with pleasure ? which can require a bit of playful, sensual experimentation. (If you need help talking about using condoms, check out our article on Talking with Your Partner about Condoms [6].)

There are many ways to learn how to make sex feel better. You may find it helpful to check out your local sex shop or visit an online shop like Good Vibrations [7]. There are all sorts of books, videos, toys, and safer sex supplies to choose from and play with. Some women find it helpful to test products when they are alone so that they feel more confident introducing the product or idea to their partner(s). Others make experimentation and testing part of sexy, playful interaction with their partner(s).

**Sex is good for you!**

If you sometimes wonder ?why bother?? and think it might not be worth the effort, then this tip is for you. First, human beings are innately sexual beings. Being sexual ? with yourself or another ? is a normal part of being human. Every woman, including every woman living with HIV, is a unique human being who deserves to live a full and satisfying sexual life.

Second, being sexually active has several health benefits. Having sex can lower your stress levels and boost your immunity. It can lower your blood pressure and improve your heart health. As a good form of exercise, it burns calories.

Being sexual can increase levels of the hormone oxytocin (the ?love? or ?connection? hormone), which has been shown to boost feelings of trust, generosity, and intimacy. Oxytocin, in turn, boosts endorphins, the body?s natural painkillers, so that pain may improve after sex. Lastly, oxytocin promotes sleep, which is a key ingredient to living a long and healthy life.

One more thing: researchers have found that having sex can boost your self-esteem. Those who already feel good about themselves have sex to feel even better. That?s right ? having sex can help you feel better about yourself, which can then lead to your having more sex and feeling even better!

## HIV and Intimacy

Sometimes the first part of feeling sexy is recognizing and trying to overcome obstacles to being intimate with (letting yourself feel close to) another person while living with HIV. Some of the main barriers to intimacy include:

- **Physical health:** It can be difficult to feel sexy or want to be sexual when you feel tired, in pain, or sick to your stomach. In some ways this is very similar to how anyone with a chronic illness can feel. It can also be hard to consider yourself sexy if you are upset with how your body?s appearance has changed since you learned you were HIV+ or began taking HIV drugs. To help with these issues, please take a look at our articles on managing Side Effects [5], Lipodystrophy and Body Changes [8], Nutrition and HIV [9], and Physical Activity, Exercise, and HIV [10].
- **Mental and emotional health:** Many HIV+ women feel depressed, and as primary caregivers, women often take care of others before themselves. Many HIV+ women also experience large life stressors such as racial discrimination, poverty, violence, and single parenthood, which can contribute to depression. For more information on how to treat and manage depression, please see Depression, Women and HIV [11].

- **Stigma:** Thirty years after the epidemic started, there is still widespread stigma [3] attached to HIV. Stigma can cause people to feel shame about being HIV+ ? a fear that they are no longer worthy of love, connection, or relationships. Feeling sexy while HIV+ can be difficult in the face of social messages suggesting that people living with HIV are somehow ?less? than others. Support groups and sharing with others who have similar experiences can help (see the ?Remember, You Are Not Alone? section below).
- **Disclosure:** Disclosing your status can be stressful, and the fear of it can keep people from dating [12] altogether, let alone having an intimate relationship with another person. While there are no perfect answers to the ?when? and ?how? questions around disclosure, our article on Disclosure and HIV [13] has many helpful tips and is a great resource on this topic. Many *A Girl Like Me* bloggers have written about their personal experiences with disclosure; you can find their writings here [14].
- **Safer sex/transmission:** Feeling sexy while living with HIV can also be tricky because, while being sexual is a normal, natural part of being human, sexual contact can be a major route for spreading HIV. If you know you are HIV+, it can be scary to think about passing HIV to a partner ? and worrying about it can totally ruin the mood! Understanding how to practice safer sex [2] can lead to much more fun and much less worry.

## Remember, You Are Not Alone

Because of the stigma and seriousness of an HIV diagnosis, HIV+ women can feel very isolated. If not already in a relationship, many women decide their days of dating (and their sex lives) are over after they are diagnosed with HIV. It can be very helpful to learn that there are other women out there, living ? and being sexy! ? with HIV.

There are many ways to learn how women living with HIV and other chronic illnesses are ?getting their sexy on? and leading full, satisfying lives. Check out some of the links on this page, read what some of our HIV+ women bloggers have written in A Girl Like Me [15], or join a support group [16]. You may find it helpful to share some of your feelings about being sexy or sexual in the group (most likely you will not be the only one to have those feelings). If that is not comfortable for you, maybe you could suggest privately that one support group meeting focus on sexuality or ask the group organizer to bring in a speaker to talk about it.

It is said that we are shaped by our thoughts. While the stigma of HIV may pose a threat to your self-esteem, it is important to believe in yourself and realize you deserve respect, love, and affection. You can choose to define sexy and sex in whatever way feels right to you, and to get your sexy on!

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- women HIV [20]
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- depressed HIV [28]
- HIV+ women sex [29]
- dating HIV [30]
- telling partner HIV+ [31]
- kiss HIV [32]

## Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to sexuality and HIV.
The Pleasure Project [33]
Kenya: HIV-Positive and Still Sexy (IRIN) [34]
To Stop HIV, Let?s Bring Sexy Back (OpenDemocracy) [35]
HIV+ and Still Sexy (Yardflex.com) [36]
Pleasure (Smartsex Resource) [37]
HIV and Intimacy (Positive Women?s Network) [38]
Chronically Sexy (ChronicBabe.com) [39]
10 Surprising Health Benefits of Sex (WebMD) [40]
Do Ya Think I?m Sexy? [41]
Yes to More Self-Love for You (SARK) [42]

- Sign Up / Login
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[34] http://www.irinnews.org/report/75357/kenya-hiv-positive-and-still-sexy
[35] https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/anne-philpott/to-stop-hiv-lets-bring-sexy-back
[36] http://www.yardflex.com/archives/001866.html
[37] http://smartsexresource.com/sex-talk/pleasure
[38] http://pwn.bc.ca/hiv-community/hiv-dating-and-relationships/hiv-and-intimacy-making-connections-work/
[39] http://www.chronicbabe.com/articles/cat/4/
[40] http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/guide/10-surprising-health-benefits-of-sex
[41] http://www.youngparkinsons.org/blog/do-ya-think-i%E2%80%99m-sexy
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