Teens and HIV: The Transition into Adulthood

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The teen years bring a variety of physical, mental, and emotional changes that can be both exciting and challenging. As a teen living with HIV, the transition into adulthood can be even more challenging because you have to live and cope daily with a chronic condition. Life may seem overwhelming at times. However, learning about teen development and how these changes affect your feelings and behavior can help make things a little easier.

If you would like to find out more about teens’ risk of acquiring HIV, see our fact sheet on What Parents and Providers Need to Know about HIV Risk and Teens.

Physical Changes

A teen’s body grows faster than at any time since infancy. During a "growth spurt," a boy can grow four inches taller and a girl three inches taller. Body weight increases, too, and while this includes both muscle and fat, boys usually add more muscle and girls more fat compared to overall weight gain. During puberty, hormonal changes in boys can cause a deeper voice, and hair in the face,
under the arms and in the pubic area. Girls begin to develop breasts, get fuller hips, and grow underarm and pubic hair. Even the brain is growing and maturing.

It is common for teens to feel self-conscious about these changes, especially if they grow at a faster or slower rate than others at the same age. Teens living with HIV may have additional physical issues. If you are starting new HIV drugs, you may have some uncomfortable side effects, such as nausea, diarrhea, dizziness, muscle pain, or fatigue. Usually these go away after the first two or three weeks as your body adjusts to the new drugs.

Sometimes HIV drugs can cause a body change called lipodystrophy. This means you gain weight in the central part of your body, such as your stomach, chest, shoulders, and waist. Lipodystrophy can also include losing fat in the face, arms, legs, hips, and buttocks ("butt"). The good news is that newer HIV drugs do not cause lipodystrophy nearly as often as older HIV drugs did.

If these body changes happen to you, they may also make you feel self-conscious about your appearance. Some teens develop a poor self-image and low self-esteem. Some young people may want to stop taking their HIV drugs. Talk to your health care provider if you feel this way so that you take the necessary steps to improve your mental health. The good news is that newer HIV drugs do not cause lipodystrophy nearly as often as older HIV drugs did.

While increased growth makes it important for all teens to eat a healthy diet, you need to make a special effort to protect your immune system by eating a balanced diet, getting enough rest, and exercising regularly. If you are not getting all the vitamins and minerals you need for your growing body from the food you eat, you may want to consider taking supplements after you talk to your health care provider.

**Mental Development**

In addition to physical growth, your mental processes -- especially perception, memory, and judgment -- develop during the teen years, as do your emotional control and ability to make decisions. Even adults living with HIV find that taking HIV drugs every day can be annoying, hard to remember, and may be difficult to hide from others. HIV drugs can be a constant reminder of your condition. In addition, you may be embarrassed about regular school absences for visiting your health care provider. All of this may make you feel more self-conscious and sensitive to what others may think of you.

Many teens think that things happen, and people react in certain ways, because of them or something they did. Sometimes this can lead to feelings of low self-esteem. Teens who do not feel good about themselves are more likely to make poor decisions about their health. They may seek the approval of others (peers) to make up for not having a positive view of themselves. As a result, they may be more tempted to use street drugs or alcohol, or to engage in unsafe sexual activity. Those with self-esteem problems may also experience problems with depression, or have suicidal thoughts. If this is true for you, it is very important that you talk to your health care provider or another trusted adult. There are many ways to get help feeling happier and more confident about yourself, and to learn to make better, more empowering decisions.

**Important:** If you are thinking of hurting or killing yourself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at any time in the US at 1-800-273-8255. If you are not in the US, click here for a world map to find crisis centers with help near you.

**Social and Emotional Growth**

Teens deal with several social and emotional issues, especially their identity. Asking "who am I?" and "how do I fit in the world?" are normal questions. Some teens find it difficult to feel accepted and to create a circle of friends. Among these teens, feeling alone and like 'no one gets you' can be common.

- Sign Up / Login
- My Account
- HIV Information
- A Girl Like Me
Teens are known to experiment with smoking, drugs, alcohol, sex, and sexuality. Unfortunately, these kinds of risk-taking behaviors can get in the way of your good judgment. If you are drunk or high, you are more likely to have unprotected sex. Recent research has shown that people who regularly take their HIV medications as prescribed and have an undetectable viral load cannot pass the virus on to their sexual partner(s) [13]. However, sex without a condom or other barrier may still expose you to other sexually transmitted infections or diseases [14] (STIs or STDs) such as herpes, hepatitis B [15] or C [16], or genital warts. STIs can interfere with your HIV treatment. There is also the risk of getting another strain of HIV if you have unprotected sex with a partner who also lives with HIV; this can cause additional damage to your immune system. In addition, sex without condoms may put you or your partner at risk of getting pregnant [17].

It is important to know that in some places, not disclosing your HIV status [18] before having sex is illegal and you can go to jail (even if you practice safer sex [9]!). If you are drunk or high, you may forget to tell a sexual partner about your HIV status and may be vulnerable to serious (though unfair) legal consequences [19].

Even though living with HIV may make you feel isolated at times, it is important to have open, honest, and supportive friendships. Many teens living with HIV are afraid to tell their friends that they have HIV because they are afraid that they may be rejected or treated badly. In fact, this can be one of the hardest decisions that a teen living with HIV can make. While telling someone that you are living with HIV may make you feel relieved that you are no longer keeping such an important secret and may give you the love and support you need from friends, it can also be scary.

Some things to consider before disclosing your HIV status [18]:

- Why do I want to tell this person about my HIV status?
- Will he or she keep my confidence?
- What happens if he or she tells other people?
- What will happen if the relationship is changed by my disclosure?

If you want or need support in disclosing your status, you can get help from your health care provider, a parent, a trusted relative, an HIV peer educator, or a friend.

Lastly, the teen years are all about preparing yourself for adulthood and your future. And your future may seem scary. Questions like "Will I find love?", "Will I be able to have children?", or "Will I ever have a normal life?" may arise. With the treatments now available, people can live very healthy, normal, and long lives with HIV.

**Support for the Teen Living with HIV**

Where can you find help and support? Trusted family members, friends, teachers, counselors, clergy, and health care providers can be a valuable support system. Many communities have local HIV support groups, too — try looking in the POZ directory [20] for some places near you (in the US). Some support groups are specifically for teens and/or young adults. In a support group, you can talk openly, safely, and confidentially with others who are in similar situations and have similar concerns.

You can also find support through online support groups and blogs (please visit A Girl Like Me [21] to learn more – several of our bloggers have experienced living with HIV as teens). If you choose to participate in an online group or blog, it is important to be careful not to share information about yourself that you do not want publicly available. Once information such as your name, address, school, or workplace is out there (on the Internet), there is no way to get it back or erase it. If you join an online group or blog, you may want to use a pseudonym (made-up name) or "handle" instead of your real name to preserve your privacy.

There are also some important things that your parents or guardians can do to help you:
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Answer questions about sex honestly and accurately
Encourage and model a healthy lifestyle, such as good eating habits and physical activity
Respect your privacy
Allow you to handle as much of your care as possible, including setting medical appointments and taking HIV drugs; encourage you to understand and be a part of medical decisions
Help you set both short-term and long-term goals that are realistic and achievable
Provide lots of love, compassion, and patience!

If your parents or guardians are not already doing these things, it is probably because they are learning how to live well with your HIV just like you. Show them this article to help them.

Tags:
- Teens HIV
- Young people HIV
- Youth HIV
- AIDS teens
- AIDS youth
- Teens support
- Youth support
- Teens development
- Teens growth
- Teens safer sex
- Teens self-esteem

Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to HIV and Teens.

Meet Mina K., a Teen Blogger Living with HIV (A Girl Like Me)
Staying Positive: Paige Rawl (TEDxYouth; video)
What These 4 Young People Want You to Know About HIV (Teen Vogue)
Being Young and HIV Positive (Avert)
HIV in People Under Age 30 (TheBody)
What It's Like Living as an HIV-Positive Teen (Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation)
Young People Living with HIV (CHATncsd; video)
Educating Teens About HIV/AIDS
HIV and AIDS (UNICEF)
Scarleteen: Sex Ed for the Real World
Teen Health Source (Planned Parenthood Toronto, Canada)
EPIC VOICES: Hydiea (amfAR; video)
Life as a Teen Who Was Born with HIV (CNN)
Camryn Garrett's YA Novel 'Full Disclosure' Gives Gen Z the Black HIV-Positive Heroine They've Been Waiting For (TheBody)
Adolescence & Puberty (What Works in Youth HIV)
Surviving Adolescence (Patient, United Kingdom)
For HIV-Positive Teens, Stigma Seen as Greatest Threat, Not Virus (Daily Nation)
[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGEimk5cx9g