



**HIV...
It's
Different
Now**

**Healthy Pregnancies
and Healthy Babies**

saskatchewan
preventioninstitute
our goal is **healthy** children

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RESOURCE 7-005 11/2018



HIV... It's Different Now

Healthy Pregnancies and Healthy Babies

You may be thinking about having a baby, or you may already be pregnant. You may have known about your HIV for a long time, or you may have found out that you have HIV during your pregnancy. Pregnancy can be exciting, scary, and maybe even overwhelming for some people. If you are living with HIV, you may be more nervous and may have some questions about how HIV might affect your pregnancy and your baby.

This booklet will give you information to help you have a healthier pregnancy. Having a healthier pregnancy will help you have a healthier baby. If you have questions after reading this booklet, there is help and support available. You can talk to your healthcare provider and your care team or look in the back of this booklet for people you can contact for information and support.

HIV is different now. With treatment, people living with HIV can live long and healthy lives. In fact, with proper treatment and care, many people living with HIV can live just as long as someone not living with HIV. People living with HIV can also have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies. **Remember, you can have a healthy baby if you are living with HIV.**

In this booklet, you will find information about:

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What is HIV?

HIV is the short form for **h**uman **i**mmunodeficiency **v**irus. HIV is a virus that attacks and weakens the immune system by destroying CD4 cells. CD4 cells are the cells that help the body fight off infections. If HIV is not treated, it can progress to **AIDS** (**a**cquired **i**mmunodeficiency **s**yndrome). People are diagnosed with AIDS when the number of CD4 cells is so low that they become sick with infections or cancers that are linked to low immune function. These infections do not usually affect people with healthy immune systems.

HIV can be passed through contact with blood, semen, pre-cum, vaginal fluid, anal fluid, and breast milk. HIV can only be passed when one of these fluids from a person living with HIV gets into the bloodstream of another person. HIV can also be passed from a mother to a baby during pregnancy and during delivery. HIV may also be passed from a mother to a baby if the baby is breastfed.

Many people living with HIV do not know they have it. The only way to know for sure is to be tested.



Treatment for HIV

Medication is very important to stop the damage that HIV does to the immune system and to prevent HIV being passed to other people. The medication used to treat and control HIV is called **combination antiretroviral therapy (cART)**. Treatment can lower the amount of HIV in the blood and other body fluids to undetectable levels. This is called **viral suppression** and means that the virus is not at a significant enough level to cause disease progression. This is good for maintaining your immune system and overall health. Having an undetectable viral load also makes it extremely difficult for you to pass HIV to others during sexual activity.

HIV treatment is now recommended for all people living with HIV, regardless of when they found out about their HIV. **If you are pregnant and HIV positive, it is recommended that you take cART throughout your pregnancy.** This will keep you healthier and help reduce the chance of your baby getting HIV. Your healthcare providers can help make sure that the medications you take are best for you and safe for your baby.

There is Hope

HIV is not a death sentence. With treatment and support, people living with HIV can live long, healthy lives. This includes having healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.



HOPE




Before and During Pregnancy

If you are planning to become pregnant, the following information will help you be as healthy as possible before becoming pregnant. Many pregnancies are not planned though. If you are already pregnant, this information can help you be healthy and have a healthy pregnancy and baby.

HIV Treatment

Taking your HIV medication (cART) is the most important thing you can do to keep yourself healthy and to reduce your chance of spreading HIV to your sex partner(s) and to your baby.

If a pregnant woman does not take HIV medications, there is a 15% to 40% chance her baby will get HIV. With HIV treatment before and during the pregnancy, during delivery, and after the baby is born, this chance is much less than 1%. Your baby will also receive HIV medicines for the first six weeks of life.



Taking your HIV medication (cART) is the most important thing you can do to keep yourself healthy and to reduce your chance of spreading HIV to your sex partner(s) and to your baby.

HIV treatment is now recommended for all people living with HIV. Starting HIV medication before you get pregnant is best to make sure that HIV will not be passed to your partner(s) while trying to get pregnant. Being on HIV treatment and maintaining a healthy lifestyle will keep you and your baby healthy.

If you are already on medication, talk to your healthcare provider before you become pregnant to make sure that your cART medication is safe to take during pregnancy. If you are already pregnant and not on treatment for HIV, it is best for you and your baby if you start medication as soon as possible. **Your healthcare provider and pharmacist will work with you to make sure your medications are safe for your baby.**

Sometimes it might be hard for you to take your medications because of side effects or because of the way that your pregnancy is making you feel (e.g., nauseous). If this is true for you, talk to your healthcare provider. It is very important that you take your medication as directed, both for your own health and for the health of your baby. Skipping doses can make it harder for your medication to fight the HIV infection (this is called **resistance** and can make future treatments more complicated and difficult for you).

Caring for Your Body

There are a number of things you can do to be as healthy as possible before and during pregnancy. These things also help your baby be healthy. If you are planning your pregnancy, try to start these things before becoming pregnant. If you are already pregnant, try to do these things as soon as possible.

- Get tested for **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**. If you are found to have an STI, get treated as soon as possible. Make sure your partner(s) also get tested and treated.
- Get tested for hepatitis C. If you are living with hepatitis C, it is best to be treated before getting pregnant. Hepatitis C treatment is NOT recommended during pregnancy.
- Take a prenatal vitamin with folic acid in it. This may be important to start before you become pregnant. Check with your healthcare provider.
- Find a healthcare provider or obstetrician who you feel comfortable with, who answers your questions, and supports your decisions.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about any medications you are using to make sure they are safe during pregnancy and to make sure they won't affect how your HIV medication works. This includes traditional Indigenous medicines, herbal medications, vitamins, and supplements.
- Eat as healthy as possible.
- If you use street drugs, smoke cannabis or tobacco, vape, or drink alcohol, try to quit before you become pregnant. If you cannot quit, reducing your use will help your health and the health of your baby. If you are having a hard time stopping or reducing your use, there is help available. Talk to your healthcare provider or other health professional for help.
- Try to exercise and get enough rest.

Your Emotional Health¹

Your emotional and mental health are important. It is easier to take your medications and go to your appointments when you are feeling emotionally well. Do things that make you feel balanced. Some examples include going for a walk, spending time with your partner, talking with a trusted friend, writing in a journal, and enjoying a hobby. Talking to other people living with HIV who have been through the same experiences can help you to make informed decisions. They can also help you with ideas for how to take your medications regularly.

If you are worried about your mental or emotional health, the following are some tips:

- Share your concerns with your healthcare provider and support people.
- Find people who you can turn to for emotional support. This may include your partner, trusted family and friends, Peer Mentors, Elders, and spiritual or religious leaders. Community counselling, Peer support, and other support services are available. Health centres, HIV organizations, and telephone and online help-lines often offer these services for free.
- Make time for activities that help you feel emotionally healthy (e.g., spiritual activities like feasts, sweats, or church; spending time in nature; meditating).
- Take care of yourself by eating well, getting enough rest, and staying active.

¹For more information about HIV and emotional health, refer to CATIE's resource: <http://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/pg-emo-wellness-en-07032018b.pdf>.

Getting Pregnant Safely

There are a lot of different ways for you to become pregnant safely, depending on your health and the health of your partner. Talk to your healthcare provider and care team to help you understand your options so that you can make the choice that is best for you.

If you and your partner are BOTH living with HIV and have suppressed viral loads, condomless (unprotected) sex is an option for you to become pregnant. This is only recommended if you and your partner have undetectable viral loads when tested twice at least a month apart AND you have both taken your HIV medications regularly for 3 to 6 months. To reduce the chance of infecting your partner (or of you being infected with a new strain of HIV if your partner is HIV positive), you can time condomless sex with ovulation (about 2 weeks before the start of your next period). If you are thinking about this option, it is a good idea to discuss it with your healthcare provider first.

If your partner does not have HIV, you can try home insemination by collecting sperm in a clean container or a condom. The sperm is then drawn into a needleless syringe and inserted into the vagina, as close to the cervix as possible. This works best when it is timed during ovulation.

If you do not have HIV but your partner is HIV positive and does not have a suppressed viral load, you may want to talk to your healthcare provider about the possibility of using PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis).

Other options involve the use of a fertility clinic and include:

- intra-uterine insemination, where semen or washed sperm is inserted into your uterus
- in-vitro fertilization, where your egg is fertilized outside of your body and then implanted back into your body


Finding a Healthcare Provider

It is very important that you feel comfortable with your healthcare provider and care team.

They should be non-judgemental, understanding, approachable, and compassionate. They should answer your questions and should be respectful of your opinions and choices. Your healthcare provider should be able to refer you to an obstetric care provider who knows about HIV and pregnancy. You can also contact your local AIDS Service Organization (listed at the end of this booklet).

It may be helpful for you to find a support person who can help you work your way through the medical system. This person can help you make sure that you are getting the care you deserve.

If you do not feel comfortable with your healthcare provider or feel like you are being pressured to make decisions that you are not happy with, there are other options available. Please see the contact information in the back of this booklet. These organizations can help you get the care and treatment you need.



It is very important that you feel comfortable with your healthcare provider and care team.

Telling Others (disclosing your status)

Remember that in most cases disclosing your HIV status is your choice. However, you legally have to tell your sex partners your HIV status before you have condomless sex (see www.aidslaw.ca for more information). If you feel safe to do so, you should tell anyone you have had sex with or shared needles with about your HIV so that they can be tested. Your healthcare provider, public health staff, or medical health officers can also tell these people, and will not use your name.

If you feel safe to do so, tell medical professionals about your HIV status so they can help you look after your health properly. If you are worried about your HIV status being shared during your pregnancy or birth, you can talk to your care providers and support people to create a plan to make sure your HIV status is kept private.

There are some people who may not understand your decision to become pregnant. This can be very difficult. Try to surround yourself with people who will support you, including friends, family, and healthcare providers. Remember that it is your right to have a baby.

With HIV treatment, care, and support, the risk of passing HIV to your baby is very low.



Labour, Delivery, and Parenting

As your due date gets closer, it is normal to feel nervous. You may also have questions about your labour and delivery, and about the health of your baby. Try to remember that you can have a healthy baby if you take good care of your health, including taking your HIV medications. Your healthcare providers will work with you to make sure that you and your baby are as healthy as possible.

If you are living with HIV, there will be a few extra things that you need to keep in mind during and after delivery. These include:

- If the amount of HIV in your blood (viral load) is high, you may need a caesarean section (c-section), but many babies can be delivered vaginally. Your healthcare provider will talk with you about your options.
- You will receive HIV medications during labour and delivery.
- Your baby will get liquid HIV medication for 6 weeks after birth.
- Your baby will be tested for HIV at birth, and again at 1 month, 3 months, and 18 months of age. It can be hard to watch your baby get blood tests. You may want to bring a family member or friend with you for support.
- **Breastfeeding is not recommended because of the risk of spreading HIV to your baby.** Pre-chewing food before feeding it to your baby is also not recommended.

For more information about your baby's health, including the effects of medication and what will happen if your baby is born with HIV, go to <https://www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/pregnancy/baby-health>.

Saskatchewan Infant Formula Program

Even if you are on HIV medication and have a suppressed viral load, breastfeeding is NOT recommended because there is still a risk of spreading HIV to your baby.

This risk has been found even in those who have an undetectable viral load through a blood test. Switching between breastfeeding and formula feeding is also NOT recommended because this increases the risk of your baby getting HIV.

Saskatchewan's Infant Formula Program provides free formula to all babies born to mothers living with HIV. Formula is provided free, from birth to approximately 1 year of age. You can refer yourself to the program, or you can be referred by a doctor or nurse.

For more information about this program, you can go to <https://skhiv.ca/infant-formula-program/> or call one of the following numbers:

Prince Albert: 306-765-6535

Saskatoon: 306-655-1477

Regina: 306-766-3915

Not breastfeeding can be very difficult for mothers living with HIV. They may feel guilt or sadness, or they may worry that people will guess that they have HIV because they are not breastfeeding.

It may be helpful for you to come up with a plan before you have your baby to explain why you are not breastfeeding. Your healthcare providers can help you with this plan, and you can also speak to others living with HIV for ideas.

It is important to remember that you are making a healthy decision for your baby by choosing not to breastfeed. Formula will provide the nutrition that your baby needs to grow healthy and strong, without the risk of HIV infection.



Even if you are on HIV medication and have a suppressed viral load, breastfeeding is NOT recommended because there is still a risk of spreading HIV to your baby.


Caring for Yourself

Caring for yourself is important. It will help ensure that both you and your baby stay healthy. This includes going to your healthcare appointments, taking your medication, eating as healthy as possible, and getting as much rest and exercise as possible. Caring for yourself also means asking for help. Taking care of a baby can be hard, and all new parents need help sometimes. Ask a friend or family member to help you cook a meal, clean the house, or take care of the baby so you can have a nap or a bath or spend time alone with your partner.

Some people experience postpartum depression or anxiety during pregnancy or after their baby is born. If you are struggling with your mental and emotional health, it is important to get support from your partner, family, friends, and medical professionals.

You can also call Saskatchewan's HealthLine by dialing 811. It is free, confidential, and open 24 hours a day.

Caring for yourself may also include using birth control if you do not wish to become pregnant again right after giving birth. You can speak with your healthcare provider about your options for birth control after delivery.



If you are struggling with your mental and emotional health, it is important to get support from your partner, family, friends, and medical professionals.





Information and Support in Saskatchewan

The following is a list of some of the organizations in Saskatchewan that offer information, support, and services related to HIV. Your healthcare provider, sexual health clinics, and public health offices can also help you find the services and support you need.

Prince Albert:

Hepatitis C and HIV Positive Care Program

Access Place, #3 - 101 15th Street East, Prince Albert, SK S6V 1G1

Phone: 306-765-6544

<http://paphr.ca/locations/clinics/sexual-health-clinic>

Regina:

AIDS Programs South Saskatchewan (APSS)

1325 Albert Street, Regina, SK S4R 2R6

Phone: 306-924-8420

Toll Free: 1-877-210-7623

<https://www.aidsprogramssouthsask.com/>

Regina:

All Nations Hope Network

2735 - 5th Avenue, Regina, SK S4T 024

Phone: 306-924-8424

Toll Free: 1-877-210-7622

Fax: 306-525-0904

<http://allnationshope.ca/>

Saskatoon:

AIDS Saskatoon and 601 Outreach

1143 Avenue F North, Saskatoon, SK S7L 1X1

Phone: 306-242-5005

Toll Free: 1-800-667-6876

Fax: 306-665-9976

<http://www.aidssaskatoon.ca/>

Saskatoon:

Persons Living With AIDS (PLWA) Network of Saskatchewan

127C Avenue D North, Saskatoon, SK S7M 1M5

Phone: 306-373-7766

Toll Free: 1-800-226-0944 in Saskatchewan

<http://www.aidsnetworksaskatoon.ca/>

Saskatoon:

OUTSaskatoon

201 - 320 21st Street West, Saskatoon, SK S7M 4E6

Phone: 306-665-1224

Toll Free: 1-800-358-1833

<http://www.outsaskatoon.ca/>

There are also a number of Peer Programs available throughout Saskatchewan. For more information about these programs, including up-to-date contact information, refer to the Saskatchewan HIV Collaborative's website at <https://skhiv.ca/support/#peer-programs>.

The following websites have more information about living with HIV, including pregnancy.

Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network:

<https://caan.ca>

Canadian AIDS Society:

<https://www.cdnaids.ca>

Toll Free: 1-800-499-1986

CATIE:

<http://www.catie.ca/en/healthy-living>

Toll Free: 1-800-263-1638

Saskatchewan HIV Collaborative:

<https://skhiv.ca/living-with-hiv/>

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute:

<https://skprevention.ca/sexual-health/hivaids/>

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