

## World AIDS day – how you can help wipe AIDS out

It was awkward dropping my pants for a stranger in a clinical environment, but as my doctor said, this is her job

By [Callum Tennant](#), Deputy Politics Editor

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Image: Pixabay

The 1st of December marks a vital day – World AIDS day. Aimed at raising awareness about the AIDS virus, smashing the stigma that continues to surround this preventable and treatable disease and crucially one day eradicating AIDS. Anybody can get AIDS, straight, gay, black, white, absolutely anyone. So, the first and most important thing to do today is to get informed, make sure you know what the facts are and how to protect yourself and in doing so, help destroy this disease.

AIDS starts as a disease called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). What HIV does to the human body (in simple terms all of us non-science studying students can understand) is destroy or impair cells of our immune systems. This means our bodies cannot defend itself from diseases and infections. A person is diagnosed with AIDS if the number of certain type of cells in their bodies falls below a specific level. HIV is transmitted through certain bodily fluids (Blood, rectal fluids, semen, vaginal fluids, pre-seminal fluids and breast milk) and is most often transmitted through unprotected sex. You do NOT catch HIV by hugging, cuddling or sharing a bathroom or cutlery with an HIV positive person.

Anyone who has sex is at possible risk of contracting HIV, so considering that we are not all going to suddenly declare celibacy how can you bring the risk of getting HIV practically down to zero? The most important step is to always wear a condom if you're going to have sex. Often women who are on contraceptive pills are more relaxed about men not wearing a condom, and men are often more relaxed about not wearing one if they know the woman they are with is on contraceptive pills. You won't have an unexpected child if you participate in sex like this – but you might just get an unexpected sexually transmitted disease, and that's not just HIV. For lesbian and gay people, you should also be wearing condoms as unprotected vaginal or anal sex allows transmission of STD's. Medical advances have made the risk of contracting HIV minimal in the UK. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales a lifesaving drug called PrEP is freely available on the NHS and in England there is a trial but PrEP is available to buy, PrEP

is a pre-exposure drug that means even if you have sex with someone with HIV without knowing it, the chance of the HIV virus being able to copy itself once in your body is lowered exponentially. Finally, a great way to limit HIV and other STD's is to get tested regularly.

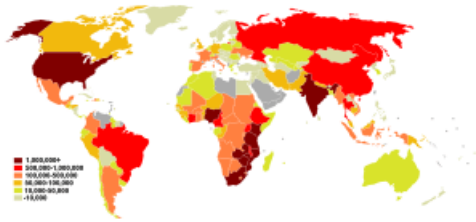


Image: UNAIDS 2008 Global report

Last week I went to get tested for the first time, it was a scary, funny and enlightening experience all at once! The first thing to state is that I should have gone sooner, because despite always using protection it's good to get tested every three months especially if you're not in a relationship and are having casual sex. There should be no shame about getting tested, it's such a positive thing to do! If you feel awkward go with friends, go as a Uni house, have a full house STD testing day! While it was awkward dropping my pants for a stranger in a clinical environment, but as my doctor said, this is her job and she sees genitals all the time. I'll admit that didn't stop me nervously laughing! They check the downstairs area, ask you to pee in a tube, do a mouth swab and take a blood sample. It took 5 minutes, and I got the results less than a week later. That's all it took to know that I'm STD free. But imagine if I had been HIV positive and imagine if I hadn't gone to get tested. I would never have known, meaning the disease wouldn't have been treated, I would have had my immune system being slowly destroyed and also risked passing the disease onto my sexual partners. If I had passed it on, then I would have felt unbelievably guilty - so make sure you get tested. If you need further incentives, then you get free condoms! Finally, don't worry about being embarrassed, if you are; you can provide a fake name, all you need to give them is a number to contact you on with the results.



Image: John Macyintyre Princess Diana was a constant advocate for breaking the Stigma surrounding AIDS

So that's how you can prevent HIV spreading and to ensure that you're safe. However, imagine if you get tested regularly and the result comes back positive! Firstly, don't panic, there is great treatment now. Someone with HIV can live a long and healthy life. If you get tested once every three months, then you've caught the disease early - you have the upper hand! Antiretroviral drugs can stop the virus from replicating itself in your body, this allows your immune system to repair itself. It is even possible for an HIV positive person to reduce their HIV viral load so low that they will not pass the virus on during sex. The critical part is to catch HIV early.

In the UK over 100,000 people have HIV, if you are LGTB then you are at an elevated risk of catching the virus, but this disease does not care for your sexuality - anyone can catch it. Just this week Lloyd Russell-Moyle a Member of Parliament revealed that he is and has for a long time been HIV positive. There is no better example than that then; HIV, today if caught early is not a death sentence, the days when Princess Diana holding the hands of HIV positive men without gloves on causing widespread alarm are over. But HIV is still a nasty disease that we should wipe out, especially as if uncaught it develops into AIDS which

is a really debilitating disease. So, get informed to destroy stigma. Practice safe sex to protect yourself and others. Get tested regularly to prevent anything becoming worse than it must, or to realise you're still STD clear. Finally, while AIDS is not massively prevalent in the UK it is much more prevalent globally with 36 million people living with HIV and 940,000 HIV related deaths last year, so on World AIDS day if you've learnt anything reading this article please donate a pound online at <https://www.nat.org.uk/donate> . Thank you.



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