

live for a shorter time after diagnosis than do gay men do. But this is a statistic that we can change.

It is now known that early diagnosis and early treatment of an HIV infection can greatly prolong the life of a person living with HIV. AIDS need not be fatal.

The information that doctors have about HIV is mostly from research about gay men. It is still not known how HIV infections affect women. Statistics about women and HIV are poorly kept and there is little documentation or research being done around women's experience of HIV. This makes it very difficult for women who live with HIV to learn about our infection or to feel validated in our experience of it.

◆ Symptoms

Women experience HIV infection differently from men. These are some of the differences that we do know about:

- Vaginal yeast infections become persistent and difficult to treat. Recent studies have suggested that a key health strategy for HIV positive women should be to focus on the control of candida (a type of yeast infection) to prevent it from becoming chronic and systemic.
- HIV positive women note changes in our menstrual cycles and our vaginal discharge.
- Women can experience hormonal changes that may show up as, for instance, hot flashes.
- The incidence of pelvic inflammatory disease increases in HIV positive women.
- HIV positive women experience bacterial pneumonia with great frequency as their immune system becomes weak. Men, on the other hand tend to develop a type of pneumonia called

PCP. Women can also develop PCP.

- Women rarely develop Kaposi's sarcoma, the cancer lesions that are associated with AIDS in men.

The fact that women's experiences with HIV and AIDS are different from those of men means that women are often misdiagnosed as not having an AIDS related health problem. This means that women can be denied social assistance, access to drug trials or other benefits that are available specifically to people with a diagnosis of AIDS.



This leaflet was produced by women involved in AIDS ACTION NOW! We are a community based group committed to the empowerment of all people living with AIDS and HIV infection. AIDS ACTION NOW! seeks to improve treatment options for people living with AIDS and HIV and to support and undertake initiatives designed to improve the quality of life for people living with AIDS and HIV infection. Contact us to get involved or to find out more. Phone (416) 944-1916 or write to the address below.

**This AIDS
pamphlet
is about
women**

LE GROUPE D'ACTION SIDA
AIDS ACTION NOW!

Suite 321 — 517 College Street, Toronto (Ontario) M6G 1A8

These are some of the issues you should know about...

◆ Sexuality

All women need to be learning about safer sex and practicing it with our partners. We need accurate, non-judgmental information about the many different ways we can express ourselves sexually. It is then up to each of us to set our own sexual limits and to determine what risks we are willing to take in our sex lives. Together we need to come up with strategies to help us say "no" when we are uncomfortable and feel that we are going beyond those limits.

Condoms and dental dams (small squares of latex rubber used to cover a woman's vagina during oral sex — available in Toronto at the Toronto Women's Bookstore) are very effective in preventing the spread of HIV, the virus thought to cause AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

But these aren't the only ways we can protect ourselves against illness. Because of AIDS, many women are re-thinking the kinds of sexual activities we do with our partners. For instance, some heterosexual women find that intercourse doesn't always need to be a big part of our lovemaking. Other forms of touching or talking, masturbating with a partner or fantasizing can also make us feel sexy and energized.

As well as looking at what we do sexually, some women are thinking about how we define ourselves sexually. Words like heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual don't always describe the ways that we express our sexuality. These words can limit our actions and our ability to talk about what we actually do when we have sex or fantasize about sex. We need to be able to talk and

think about sex in ways that make sense to us so we can assess the changes we have to make.

For women who are HIV positive new definitions of sexuality can seem elusive. The communities we live in, whether lesbian or straight, don't yet know how to accommodate us. So there still isn't very much information about how we and our partners can maintain a healthy sexuality.

Because of the virus, HIV positive women can experience changes in our menstrual cycles, our vaginal fluids and our cervixes (which can become fragile and prone to what's known as dysplasia or abnormal cell growth). We need information on what these changes mean for us. How we remain sexual while staying as healthy as possible.

◆ Reproductive rights

Women in general haven't got access to a full range of choices in terms of the ways we live our reproductive lives. HIV positive women experience this lack of choice in a number of specific ways.

- The only way for people with HIV infections to get access to many treatments is through experimental drug trials. Often these trials place restrictions on women's participation according to our "childbearing potential." HIV positive women have been excluded from drug

trials or have been sterilized or forced to use birth control and subjected to pregnancy tests as conditions of our inclusion in these trials. HIV positive women must have access to treatments no matter what our reproductive status.

- HIV positive women need supportive, non-judgmental, informed counselling to enable us to make reproductive choices that make sense for our lives. HIV positive women, particularly those whose infection is not advanced, can bear healthy children and live to raise them. We need to be assured of access to excellent healthcare for ourselves and for our children regardless of their HIV status. We also need access to daycare, affordable housing and a buddy system to assist with the work we do in our homes.
- HIV positive women in some cities have been denied access to abortions. We need access to safe, affordable abortions if we should decide not have a child.

◆ Medical attitudes

Many doctors are still reluctant to see HIV as a virus that can and does affect women. Women concerned about their HIV status are often discouraged from taking the HIV antibody test that can tell them whether they are HIV positive. As a result of this, many women do not find out that they are HIV positive until their infection is quite advanced and their health has already been seriously affected. In fact women with HIV tend to