



HIV / AIDS Etiquette and Inclusion

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus, the virus that can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Unlike some other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV. That means that once you are diagnosed with HIV, you are HIV positive for life.

HIV affects specific cells of the immune system, called CD4 cells, or T cells. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of these cells that the body can't fight off infections and disease. When this happens, HIV infection leads to AIDS.

No cure currently exists for HIV, but scientists are working hard to find one, and remain hopeful. In the early days of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS was a death sentence. Before the introduction of Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) in the mid-1990s, people with HIV could progress to AIDS in just a few years. However, today, with proper medical care and strong support systems, those living with HIV can control their virus and even reverse much of the damage caused by HIV and dramatically prolong the lives of many HIV positive people to normal life expectancy and lower their chance of spreading the virus to others.

Despite these great strides, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is not over. Both HIV and AIDS are neither historic phenomena nor diseases that afflict only those living in developing countries. Since its discovery in 1981, 1.7 million people in the U.S. are estimated to have been infected with HIV, including over 619,000 who have already died from complications stemming from HIV or AIDS. States are living with HIV; and HIV diagnoses have been reported in all 50 states, the District of Columbia as well as other U.S. territories and outlying areas. It is believed that an estimated 20% of all those living with HIV are currently unaware of their HIV status and that a person becomes infected with HIV every 9.5 minutes.

HIV/AIDS is not spread by day-to-day contact. HIV/ AIDS is not spread through shaking hands, hugging, or a casual kiss. You cannot become infected from a toilet seat, a drinking fountain, a door knob, dishes, drinking glasses, food, cigarettes, pets, or insects. HIV is not spread through the air, and it does not live long outside the body.

While in Berkeley, you may meet someone who is HIV positive or someone living with AIDS. Should someone share their HIV-positive status with you, it is important to let that person set the tone for the conversation. While curiosity is natural, we ask that



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you avoid asking overly prying questions related to a HIV positive person's status, such as, "How did you become positive?" Oftentimes, those living with HIV do not want to disclose the details of the circumstances that led to them becoming HIV positive (seroconversion) and asking such a question could be considered very intrusive. Also, we ask that you try to avoid using insensitive and degrading phrases such as "full-blown AIDS," "AIDS victim," "HIV sufferer," or "diseased" when talking about HIV/ AIDS. Such questions and terminology are degrading and fuel the stigmatization of those living with HIV/ AIDS.

Before being intimate, take a moment to speak with your partner(s) about HIV and other STIs. If you are unsure of your status, then be honest and say so. Better yet, take a moment and get tested together! Rapid Testing is regularly available at [University Health Services](#). A helpful hint: when trying to learn a person's status, avoid phrasing your inquiry as, "Are you clean?" Using the term "clean" to denote an HIV-negative status strongly implies that being HIVpositive is "dirty," adding to the stigma surrounding the virus. Instead ask, "What is your HIV status?" and go from there. **Remember, regardless of status, it is always important to use safer sex practices.**

Think about ways in which you can model effective ally behavior. One of the key ways to do that is as simple as washing your hands! Because people living with HIV are more susceptible to the harmful effects of bacteria, viruses or other pathogens than those who are HIV-negative, we ask that if you aren't feeling well or if you are sick that you try to model proper etiquette and take a sick day, rest up, and maintain a safe distance from others. Additionally, taking a few extra minutes to make sure you are practicing proper hand washing techniques and hand sanitization after using the bathroom to help minimize the spread of germs and ensure the well-being of everyone attending this year's conference.

Don't assume that all HIV-positive people are alike and have similar needs and comfort levels in discussing their status. Because of widespread stigmatization and criminalization of HIV/AIDS in the United States, confidentiality is a paramount concern for many people living with HIV. If you want to learn more about how to be an ally to an HIV positive person and make a difference for the accessibility needs of HIV positive people, talk to your friends who may identify as HIV positive. If you don't know anyone who is openly HIV positive, consider participating in a workshop or educational session and learn about the various policy, health, educational, and political needs and concerns of those living with HIV.

As an inclusive community, we believe everyone should be treated with dignity and respect that reflects our shared humanity. Therefore, we ask you to cherish the humanity of those who are HIV-positive and help us work to defeat the stigma that exists around HIV/ AIDS. Those living with HIV are more than just the virus or syndrome and deserve to be treated that way. As a result, should someone disclose their status to you, be prepared to respond with a confidential spirit, an open mind, and a willingness to care.

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