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Are you at risk?



HIV Infection, Sexual Health & Taking Control



Some people call me a sex worker. I cannot think about what other people say; what I am trying to do is send my children to school. When I was young and new in the business, I used to be drunk most of the time. I never insisted on condom usage, I did not care! And the customers loved me for this – I was the most popular.

I struggled with sexually transmitted infections (STIs), but I eventually got help from a health facility..... Until I tested positive for HIV at an antenatal clinic. And then the party was over and reality hit me and I realized that I do care, especially about the health of my child. I want to live. I started taking antiretroviral therapy (ART) and I am not going to stop. It keeps me alive, strong, looking beautiful and healthy. I love my ART.

I feel more in control of my life now and so I have reduced my drinking, which makes me feel better. Sobriety helps me to be a good mother. No matter what a customer says or how much money he offers, no condom, no sex. I never want another STI or strain of HIV. This is my body and life, I intend to protect it.

1 Are You at Risk?

- Most of the time, we do not know the HIV status of our clients or partners.
- We are at much higher risk for HIV than the rest of the population because of the times we may have had sex without a condom and because we have a large number of sexual partners.
- Research shows that 70 percent, or seven out of 10 sex workers, are living with HIV.
- Many of us are not on HIV treatment or have defaulted from HIV treatment.
- Because of the high-risk nature of our work, we must be especially cautious about HIV protection, prevention, treatment and care.

2 Safety

- Use condoms correctly every time. Stand strong and negotiate for this with clients!
- When talking to a client, keep a confident look on your face and be assertive, strong and in control.
- Always trust your instincts. If you feel uncertain about someone, then there is a good reason.

- Be friendly but firm when negotiating services with a client and explain your limits.
- Carry your mobile and always keep a number on speed dial of a person close by who can come and help you. Try to avoid going in a vehicle, or to deserted or isolated places with clients.
- Always ensure someone knows where you are and where you are going. Communicate with colleagues while working.
- Minimize alcohol use to keep your head clear and sharp.

3 Reducing Risk & Taking Control – Condoms, Lubricants



- By using condoms correctly every time you have sex, and with every client and partner, you can reduce transmission of HIV and other STIs.
- Even if you are already living with HIV, it is important to protect yourself from new and different strains of the virus and other STIs that can make you sick.
- Water-based lubrication (NOT petroleum jelly, lotions or cooking oil) can help prevent condoms from breaking or slipping.
- You should always negotiate condom use with clients before you enter the bedroom or place, before you remove clothes and you begin to have sex. Negotiating with no clothes on is much harder.
- To demand condom use, you can use the same power and negotiation skills that you use to determine payment.
- If we all agree together to use condoms with clients, it will be harder for clients to refuse to use them. Working together to demand condom use can benefit anyone.
- It is better if you put the condom on the client's penis yourself, rather than rely on him to do it. This way, you can guarantee that it is being used correctly and is not damaged.
- You may not want to use condoms with your boyfriend or girlfriend because it feels less intimate, but it's important to protect each other from HIV and other STIs.
- Many think if both partners are infected with HIV, condoms are not needed. This is a myth. New strains can be passed. If you are HIV-positive, condoms are very important to your and your partner's protection and health.

4 Testing & Treatment for STIs

- Untreated STIs can have serious permanent damage for all, including unborn children.
- It's important to remember that not all STIs show symptoms, especially in women. So, if you have had unprotected sex, you should be screened for STIs.
- Some common STI symptoms are pain during sex or urination, abnormal discharge and any bumps or sores that appear on or near the genital areas.
- If you experience any symptoms, you should immediately go to a clinic or hospital to be screened or tested.
- STIs do not go away without medical treatment at the clinic or hospital, even if some symptoms go away with time, but they have not gone and are still inside your body. They can be passed to partners and unborn children, and to children during childbirth.
- Some of us are afraid to go to the clinic for treatment because we fear being mistreated or embarrassed.
- Traditional healers cannot cure STIs. You will waste money you need if you go to them for STI treatment.
- Leaving an STI untreated can increase your risk for HIV and may cause infertility, so it is important to seek treatment as soon as possible.

Tips for a better experience:

- Dress conservatively.
- Do not go to the clinic or hospital drunk.
- Do not smoke or be loud at the clinic of hospital.
- Go with a friend for support.
- State your symptoms clearly and honestly.
- Contact SNAP for a list of "friendly" health care centres.

- If you have any STI symptoms, you should stop having sex until you can get treated so you don't pass the infection to your clients or cause yourself pain.
- Most STIs can be treated with medication from clinics or hospitals and cured. To prevent the risk of another infection, it is important to use a condom correctly every time you have sex.

5 Anal Sex

- Anal sex (when the penis is inserted into the anus or rectum) greatly increases your risk of HIV.
- Unprotected anal sex is the riskiest type of sex for getting HIV since the anus and rectum do not have natural lubrication, which can result in small tears, allowing an opening for HIV to enter.
- Condoms and water-based lubricant should always be used during anal sex to help reduce the risk.
- Some clients prefer anal sex. We must be strong enough to say NO to unprotected anal sex because it is so risky.

6 HIV Testing & Counseling

- Many of us know our HIV status already, but some of us have not been tested for HIV.
- Although you may feel scared, it is important to go for regular HIV counseling and testing so you can take action to protect your health and your children's health.
- Going to the clinic with a friend can provide support.
- HIV counseling and testing is offered at all government clinics for free.
- Knowing your HIV status helps you to make informed decisions about your future and to take better care of your health and your children.
- If you test HIV-negative, you must be tested again after two months because sometimes, HIV will not show up on the test until this amount of time has passed.
- Regardless of your HIV status, you must continue to use condoms.
- If you are having unprotected sex, it's very important to be tested for HIV every two months.
- If you test positive for HIV, you may feel alone and afraid. But have hope! There is effective treatment for HIV. You can live a long and productive life, and raise your children.
- Take some time, allow yourself to calm, seek counseling, and enroll in treatment and care programming. You will be okay.

7 Treatment & Care for HIV

- If you test positive for HIV, it can be overwhelming. Even if you feel healthy, it is important to talk to a health care provider about care and treatment.
- At the facility, the health care provider will screen your blood, assess your HIV progression and check for other opportunistic diseases, like TB. This is important for those living with HIV.
- It is important to learn if you are ready to start treatment, and if not, how you can remain in care until you are.
- By enrolling in treatment, you are taking control of your health and your future, and ensuring that you will be around for a long time to raise your children and contribute to your family.
- At the right time, you will be put on HIV treatment called ART.
- Once on ART it is very important that you take your medication every day and do not stop once you have started.
- Millions of people around the world, including in Swaziland, are taking ART. You can do this, too! Be strong!
- Reducing alcohol use will help you remain adherent to your ART and make your immune system stronger.

8 Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission

- Plan pregnancies carefully with your health care provider and partner.
- If you become pregnant, it is important for the health of your baby to enroll in antenatal and prevention of mother-to-child (PMTCT) programs.
- All women living with HIV in Swaziland who are pregnant or breastfeeding are recommended to start treatment, regardless of CD4 count. This is called life-long ART for pregnant and lactating women (LLAPLa).
- If you are HIV-negative or do not know your HIV status, it is important for the health of your unborn child to get an HIV test.
- Taking antiretrovirals while you are pregnant greatly reduces the risk of passing HIV to your child.
- It is important to attend all clinic appointments and take all medication to protect your baby.
- Drinking alcohol and smoking dagga while pregnant is very dangerous for your baby.

9 How to Stay Healthy Living with HIV

- Try to maintain a balanced attitude about living with HIV. It is a life challenge, but not a death sentence—it is a manageable chronic disease and you are the manager! Find strength and carry on.
- Joining a support group can help manage your feelings and live positively with HIV.
- Eat healthy foods, including fruits, grains and pap, dairy products, vegetables, meats and beans.
- Daily exercise, even for 30 minutes per day can increase your health and help your body to fight HIV and it also make you feel and look good.
- Alcohol and smoking (both cigarettes and dagga) puts stress on your immune system, making it hard to fight HIV. Reducing or stopping alcohol and smoking will help you to be healthier and stronger.

10 How to Reduce Your Risk

- Get tested for HIV every three months.
- Reduce your alcohol and dagga use because it makes it harder to control clients and maintain your safety.
- Get screened or tested for STIs if you have any symptoms or have had unprotected sex.
- Complete your STI treatment course and do not share the medication – the STI will not go away if you do.
- Use condoms correctly and consistently with all clients.
- Use condoms correctly and consistently with your boyfriend, husband or love partner.
- Use condoms even if you are living with HIV and so is your love partner or client.
- If you are coughing for more than three weeks, go to the clinic or hospital to be tested for TB.



