

HIV Language Guidance

HIV is a managed medical condition like many others. Some words used for HIV and those who are living with HIV, can be stigmatizing. The words used can be powerful for how we treat people and how people view themselves.

This guide offers preferred words and phrases to use where focus is on the person, not their condition. People choose their own language and may use older terms to describe themselves and that's okay. Take people's lead with the words they are most comfortable with using. Language used in person is important. Keep in mind that words may change with time and environment, therefore this document will be updated as requested.

AVOID USING	BEST TO USE
HIV Virus	HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus]
HIV Positive Person, Positives, <i>AIDS or HIV carrier, AIDS or HIV patient, HIV cases</i>	Person/People Living with HIV – place the person before their diagnosis
HIV-Infected / infection / positive, Person infected with HIV	Persons living with HIV – avoid using the words ‘infected’, ‘infection’, or ‘positive’. Alternatives: HIV status, HIV diagnosis, HIV acquisition, HIV transmission.
Became infected with HIV	CONTRACTED, DIAGNOSED, OR ACQUIRED HIV – avoid using ‘infected’
HIV / AIDS	Use either HIV or AIDS [Each is a different medical term. HIV is an abbreviation of the virus name. AIDS is a clinical condition.]
AIDS [when referring to HIV]	This stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome - a group of illnesses that might occur because of a severely weakened immune system. This term is used less often due to HIV medicines giving a patient a strong immune system. ‘Advanced HIV’ is used in some situations by clinicians for someone diagnosed over a significant length of time after acquiring HIV and has not benefitted from anti-retroviral medication.

AVOID USING	BEST TO USE
Catch / Contract AIDS	Receive an AIDS diagnosis or Develop AIDS
Full Bown AIDS	AIDS or an AIDS diagnosis
AIDS test	HIV test – there is no test for AIDS (the clinical syndrome)
Dies of AIDS	Died of advanced HIV / Died of complications related to HIV
Victim / Sufferer	Person Living with HIV – words like ‘victim’ / ‘sufferer’ can be very negative <i>and should not be used</i>
Disclose / Disclosure	Tell, Talk about, Share – ‘disclose’ has a negative and secretive meaning that can amp up feelings of shame
Clean – as in “Are you clean?”	Do you know your HIV status? Using the word ‘clean’ implies that people living with HIV are ‘dirty’. Note: clients may us the term ‘clean’ when referencing STIs not specifically HIV.
Sero discordant couple	Mixed status couple – a relationship where some persons are living with HIV while another / others are not
Mother to Baby Transmission	Perinatal transmission of HIV – mother to baby implies blame on the birth parent
Number of HIV infections	Number of People Diagnosed with HIV
At-risk or High-risk person / population	Affected community / population, Person / population with greater likelihood of..., High Incidence Population, People / Person exposed to HIV
Target population	Key population / Prioritized population

What to do if you say something by mistake:

Take a deep breath. Apologize immediately, without making it about you; you can quickly and simply say “I am sorry.”

Take ownership by thanking the person/people for correcting you.

Continue working on improving the words you use going forward.

The language we use is important and shows others that we respect them. Our words can develop trust and lead to good things for everyone.