

# Growing your Family



**An introduction to pregnancy  
planning, surrogacy and adoption  
for people living with HIV**



Lignes directrices canadiennes  
en matière de planification  
de la grossesse en présence du VIH



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**As a person living with HIV, you might wonder if having a child is an option for you. Rest assured that people living with HIV can have children – and many do!**

**There are many ways to have a child, including options for people of all genders\* and sexual orientations. It is possible to have a child through pregnancy, surrogacy or adoption. All of these options are possible for people living with HIV.**

**We know that people who are on treatment and have an undetectable viral load do not pass HIV to their sexual partners. For people who want to get pregnant, maintaining an undetectable viral load also prevents HIV from being passed to the baby during pregnancy and delivery.**

**You may be planning to have a child soon, or maybe you just want some information in case you decide to have a child in the future. Either way, this booklet will help you to understand your options.**

*\*We acknowledge the diversity of people living with HIV, including trans people. Where possible, we have used gender-neutral language in this resource. In some places, gendered language (i.e. the terms "woman" and "female" to describe a person who is able to get pregnant, and "man" and "male" to refer to a person who intends to use their sperm to make a baby) has been used for clarity. The information in this resource is relevant for trans people. Trans people who want to pursue pregnancy are encouraged to get more information from a healthcare provider who is knowledgeable about pregnancy planning for trans people.*

# What you should know if you are living with HIV and you want to get pregnant

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Planning to get pregnant is an exciting time in your life. It's also a time when you'll probably have a lot of questions about what you can do to get ready for pregnancy.

One of the most important things that you can do for your own health and for the health of your baby is to make sure to take your HIV treatment. **If you start HIV treatment before pregnancy and if you maintain an undetectable viral load before becoming pregnant and throughout your pregnancy, your baby will NOT be born with HIV.**

This is wonderful news for people living with HIV who want to become pregnant and have a child!

Read on to learn about the things you can do to prepare for your pregnancy and about different ways that you can get pregnant.



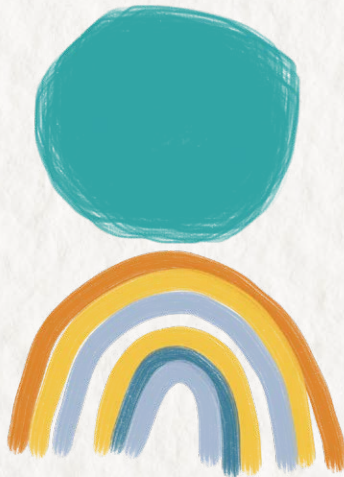
## Preparing for pregnancy

Talk to your HIV doctor about your plans to have a baby. If you do not have an HIV doctor, your local HIV organization may be able to help you get connected with a doctor. Visit [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) to find an HIV organization near you.

When you tell your doctor that you are planning to have a baby, they will review your HIV medications to make sure they can be taken during pregnancy. Although most HIV medications are safe to take during pregnancy, some are best avoided. If you are on any of these medications, your doctor will prescribe different ones for you before you start trying to become pregnant.

Before trying to get pregnant, make sure that you have been on HIV treatment for at least three months and that you have a minimum of two undetectable viral load test results at least one month apart. Ideally, you should aim to maintain an undetectable viral load for at least six months before trying to get pregnant. Your HIV doctor can help you decide when it is a good time to start trying to get pregnant.

If you do not have an undetectable viral load, talk to your doctor. They can help you if you're having difficulty taking your HIV treatment as prescribed. Your doctor might switch your medications if they are not working for you.



Besides looking after your HIV, there are some other things that you should do to prepare for pregnancy:

- Talk to a healthcare provider about all prescription and over-the-counter medications and natural remedies that you are taking. Your healthcare provider will tell you if they are safe to take during pregnancy.
- Get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and get treated if necessary. Getting tested regularly is important for your health, and some STIs can be harmful to a baby during pregnancy if they are not treated.
- Take folic acid every day for three months before getting pregnant and for at least the first three months of pregnancy. Folic acid helps to prevent birth defects. Most people need to take 0.4 mg to 1 mg of folic acid per day but some people need to take a higher dose. Talk to a healthcare provider about how much you should take and whether there are ways to help cover the cost of folic acid.

If you are planning to have a baby with someone who is also living with HIV, they should aim to have an undetectable viral load for at least three months (ideally six months) before trying to conceive as well. Maintaining an undetectable viral load is important for both your health and your partner's health.

## Ways of getting pregnant

It's possible to get pregnant through sex, through home insemination or by using the services of a fertility clinic. You can get pregnant with sperm from a romantic partner or someone else who you plan to raise the child with (a parenting partner). You can also get pregnant with sperm from someone who will not be raising the child with you (a sperm donor).

### Getting pregnant through sex

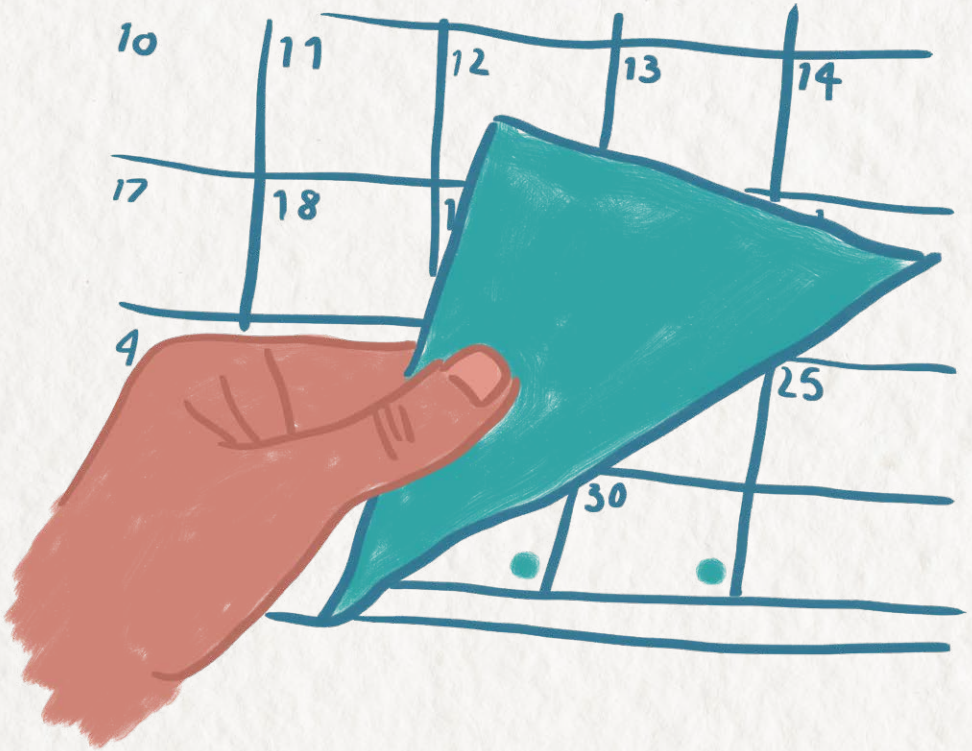
Effective HIV treatment means that for people living with HIV who want to get pregnant through sex, having a baby can be very simple. If you are maintaining an undetectable viral load, you can be confident that you will not pass HIV to your sex partner or to your baby. To start trying to have a baby, you can start having sex without using condoms or any other kind of birth control.

### Getting pregnant using home insemination

Home insemination is another option for getting pregnant. This involves placing sperm into your vagina. The sperm can come from a partner or from a donor. You can get sperm from someone you know or buy it from a sperm bank if the clinic has a home insemination program. Talk to your HIV doctor, or another healthcare provider if you are thinking about home insemination. They can explain how and when to do home insemination for the best chance of getting pregnant. If you choose to buy sperm, your doctor can refer you to a fertility clinic where you can access sperm banks.

## Improving your chance of getting pregnant

To increase your chance of getting pregnant, you can keep track of the days when you are most likely to get pregnant. This time is called ovulation and it is when your eggs are released from your ovaries. You can talk to your doctor about ways to figure out when you are ovulating. They might suggest using a calendar or phone app, or buying ovulation predictor sticks from a drug store.



If you are trying to get pregnant through sex, you can plan to have sex around the time when you will be ovulating for the best chance of pregnancy. However, some couples prefer not to track ovulation, and many people get pregnant simply by having sex regularly throughout the month, especially around the middle of their cycle.

If you are trying to get pregnant through home insemination, you will need to track your ovulation in order to know when you are most fertile.



Some people are able to get pregnant soon after they start trying, and for others it takes longer. It often takes between six months and one year to get pregnant. Talk to a healthcare provider if you're concerned that it is taking too long. Your healthcare provider might refer you to a fertility clinic.

## Getting pregnant using a fertility clinic

You might use a fertility clinic if you are having trouble getting pregnant through sex or home insemination or if you want to get pregnant using donor sperm.

If you want to use a fertility clinic, ask your doctor for a referral. Access to services at fertility clinics for people living with HIV varies across Canada. When you meet with someone at a fertility clinic, ask about the clinic's policies related to HIV. For example, you should find out if you need to have a certain viral load to use their services, and if they are able to handle biological samples from people living with HIV.

There are costs for some of the services at fertility clinics. Private or public health insurance might be able to help cover the costs.



## Ways to prevent passing HIV to an HIV-negative man

If you're maintaining an undetectable viral load, you will not pass HIV to an HIV-negative partner through sex. However, if you are not on HIV treatment or haven't been able to maintain an undetectable viral load, there are a few other options to prevent passing HIV to your partner.

If you plan to get pregnant through sex, PrEP may be an option for your partner to consider. PrEP, which stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis, involves a person who is HIV negative taking a prescription pill on a regular basis to prevent HIV. If you would like to learn more about PrEP, visit a PrEP clinic, talk to a healthcare provider or visit [www.catie.ca/prep](http://www.catie.ca/prep).

If you plan to get pregnant through home insemination, there is no chance of passing HIV to the person you get sperm from.

It is always recommended that you work with your healthcare team to achieve an undetectable viral load before trying to become pregnant.

# What you should know if you are a man living with HIV who wants to have a baby

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If you want to be the biological parent of a child (that is, the baby is made with your sperm), you have a few options. You might choose to have a baby with a romantic partner or someone else who you plan to raise the child with (a parenting partner). Surrogacy is also a possibility. Page 12 has more information about surrogacy.

If you plan to have a child with someone who is also living with HIV, make sure that you are both maintaining an undetectable viral load before you start trying to conceive. Maintaining an undetectable viral load is important for both your health and your partner's health. Also, when your partner maintains an undetectable viral load, this prevents HIV from being passed to the baby. Read through the section of this booklet for people living with HIV who want to get pregnant for more information, and think about how you can support your partner through their pregnancy.



If you want to have a baby with someone who does not have HIV, make sure that you are maintaining an undetectable viral load before trying to conceive in order to prevent passing HIV to them. A baby can only be born with HIV if the person who gets pregnant has HIV and has a detectable viral load. So, if you prevent passing HIV to your partner this will also prevent HIV from being passed to the baby.

Talk to an HIV doctor before trying to have a baby and ask them any questions that you have. If you do not have an HIV doctor, your local HIV organization may be able to help you get connected with a doctor. Visit [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) to find an HIV organization near you.

If you do not have an undetectable viral load, talk to your doctor. They can help you if you're having difficulty taking your HIV treatment as prescribed. Your doctor might switch your medications if they are not working for you.

Talk to a healthcare provider about all medications that you are taking. They will tell you if they are safe to take when you're trying to conceive.

Make sure to get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and to get treated if necessary. Getting tested regularly is important for your health and the health of your partner, and some STIs can be harmful to a baby during pregnancy if they are not treated.

## Ways to prevent passing HIV to an HIV-negative woman

If you're maintaining an undetectable viral load, you will not pass HIV to an HIV-negative partner through sex.

However, if you are not on treatment or haven't been able to maintain an undetectable viral load, PrEP may be an option for your partner to consider. PrEP, which stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis, involves a person who is HIV negative taking a prescription pill on a regular basis to prevent HIV. If you would like to know more about PrEP, visit a PrEP clinic, talk to a healthcare provider or visit [www.catie.ca/prep](http://www.catie.ca/prep).

You may have heard about sperm washing as a way to prevent passing HIV when trying to conceive. Sperm washing is a process of separating sperm out of semen. Sperm do not contain HIV, so using washed sperm prevents HIV from being passed. Sperm washing is not needed if you have an undetectable viral load because this eliminates any risk of passing HIV. If you have questions about sperm washing, ask a healthcare provider.

It is always recommended that you work with your healthcare team to achieve an undetectable viral load before trying to conceive.

# Having a baby with a surrogate

A surrogate is a person who gives birth to a child for somebody else to be the parent.

People use surrogates for a variety of reasons. For example, surrogacy is an option for men who want to have a baby with their own sperm and do not have a female partner. It is also an option for women who want to have a baby with their own egg and are not able to carry a baby.

If you are considering using a surrogate, you should meet with a lawyer. You will need to create and sign a legal agreement with the surrogate. In Canada, it is illegal to pay a surrogate to have a baby for you, though you will need to pay for some of the expenses associated with the pregnancy.

It is possible for people living with HIV to access surrogacy in Canada. However, if you plan to be a biological parent of the child (i.e., if you plan to use your own egg or sperm), you should consult with a surrogacy agency or lawyer to learn if there are any special considerations related to HIV that you should know about.



# Adopting a child

People living with HIV have successfully adopted children in Canada (called domestic adoption). It may also be possible for you to adopt a child from another country (called international adoption). However, some countries do not allow people living with HIV to adopt children, so you will have fewer options for international adoption.

Most domestic adoptions are done through child protection agencies. If you are considering adopting a child, you can start the process by connecting with a local adoption agency or your local child protection agency to ask about adoption.

There are fees associated with adopting a child, so it's a good idea to think about how you will cover the cost.



# Getting ready to have a child

As you consider your options for how you will go about having a child, there are some things that you can start doing to get ready.

## Take care of your own health

When you are thinking of having a child, you are no doubt thinking about how you can give your child the best life possible. One of the best things that you can do for a child is to take care of your own health. This is because when you are in good health, you can focus more of your time and energy on a child.

Taking HIV treatment and going to see your HIV doctor regularly are important things that you can do for your health.

Here are some other ways to take care of your health:

- Eat healthy food and exercise.
- Take care of your mental and emotional health.
- If you smoke, consider quitting or cutting back.
- If you drink alcohol or use drugs, consider quitting or cutting back.

If you want to make a change in your life, you don't have to do it alone. There are people who can help you with all of the things on this list. Talk to a healthcare provider or someone at an HIV organization to learn about supports that are available in your community.





## Get connected to healthcare and other services in your community

Whatever method you choose for having a child, there are many different services available to support you. It is a good idea to start looking into what services are available in your community as early as possible.



### Your healthcare team

It is important to have an HIV doctor who you trust and who you feel comfortable talking to honestly. Talk to your HIV doctor about your goals of having a child. Even if you do not plan on having a child for a while, your doctor can answer any questions that you have. In many cities, there are HIV doctors who specialize in pregnancy. If you live in or near one of these cities, you may want to see one of these HIV doctors when you start planning to have a baby.

If you are going to be the biological parent of a baby, you will probably need to see some other healthcare providers besides your HIV doctor. For example, pregnant people should see a healthcare provider who specializes in pregnancy. In many cities, there are obstetricians (doctors who look after pregnant people) who specialize in HIV. If you live in or near one of these cities, you can consider going to one of these doctors

for care during pregnancy planning and pregnancy. People living with HIV will need to get pregnancy care from a doctor (usually an obstetrician), but in some cases it may be possible to also get support from a midwife.

People who want to conceive might also need to see other specialists. Just like with your HIV doctor, it is important that you trust these healthcare providers and feel comfortable talking to them honestly.

## **Other services you might need to access**

Besides healthcare, you might need to access some other services when you are preparing to have a child. For example, you might work with a social worker or with someone at an adoption agency. You might also need the help of a lawyer if you are planning on adopting a child or using a surrogate.

## **You have a right to be treated with respect**

People living with HIV have a right to be treated with respect and to access all of the same services as people who do not have HIV. You may want to find healthcare providers and other service providers who have experience working with people living with HIV. If you live in a smaller community this may be more difficult. In that case, try to find healthcare providers and other service providers who are willing to learn about HIV.

It is possible that a healthcare provider or other service provider will treat you unfairly or try to deny you service because of your HIV status. This is called discrimination. If you experience discrimination, you may want to switch to a different service provider. If you feel that a particular worker discriminated against you, you can file a complaint with the organization where the person works.

## **Find services near you**

There are many knowledgeable healthcare providers throughout Canada who have experience working with people living with HIV. Visit [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) to find services near you.

# Find out more

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This booklet has given you some basic information that you should know as a person living with HIV who is planning to have a child. There is a lot more information out there about all of the different ways to have a child.

For information about pregnancy planning for people living with HIV, [www.hivpregnancyplanning.com](http://www.hivpregnancyplanning.com) is a good place to start.

If you want to learn more about HIV, talk to a healthcare provider, connect with your local HIV organization or visit [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca).





[www.CATIE.ca](http://www.CATIE.ca)

[www.hivpregnancyplanning.com](http://www.hivpregnancyplanning.com)

    /CATIEinfo

### Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV, pregnancy planning and the treatments in question.

CATIE provides information resources to help people who wish to support others or manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice.

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