Can We Talk

Rx for HIV-positive women whose doctors are the silent type

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HIV meds may affect women differently from men. Yet a Boehringer Ingelheim (BI) study recently found that half of positive women have never discussed this with their doctors. Sound familiar? Many women in the study who did speak up got the answers they needed. Here's how you can, too.

Start the conversation. "I think people sometimes feel intimidated talking to a health care professional," says Tonia Poteat, a physician's assistant at the Grady Infectious Disease Program in Atlanta. If that's true for you, bring along a friend who feels comfortable asking questions for you and writing down answers.

Keep it going. Be consistent. "In many settings, people don't see the same provider every time," says Dawn Averitt Bridge, an HIV-positive mother and founder of the Well Project (for positive women), which assisted in the BI study. "If women don't see the same person regularly, they don't get the chance to develop a relationship." When making appointments, don't just accept the next available slot. Choose a doctor and get on his or her schedule. The better you know your doctor—and vice versa—the more effectively you'll be able to work together.

Ask questions. Raise your issues and give your doctor the chance to help. "The doctor is human and doesn't know everything, but ideally [he or] she will look for answers and discuss your concerns," says Averitt Bridge. If the doctor needs to research a question after your appointment, ask if you can follow up by phone or e-mail to get the information.

Reach for resources. "If your doctor isn't meeting you halfway, you might want to find someone else," says Poteat. Or reach further for help. "Your HIV team doesn't have to be limited to people in white coats," Averitt Bridge says. "Ask the nurses, phlebotomists, advocates, peer counselors, treatment educators and people at your local AIDS organization for answers too."

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