Immaculate Infection

How you got it doesn't matter, but it makes all the difference

November 1, 1997 By River Huston

When a gay man reveals he's positive, there are predictable reactions—compassion, revulsion, fear of sorrow—but the one question rarely asked is "How did you get it?" Of course, many don't ask because they're afraid the guy just might tell them—in detail.

The situation si different for a woman who discloses her status. Everyone—even politically correct AIDS activists—wants to know how she got it. If she has track marks like the Long Island Rail Road up her forearm or a skirt that shows off her uterus the curiosity wanes. People just assume.

Some want to believe it was all a freakish event—a lethal toothbrush, say. One kid in a church group asked me about this mode of transmission: "You're standing in line at the bank, right? And these guys come in with guns. And the guy in front of you is HIV. And they shoot him, for no reason. And the bullet goes through him into you. Can you get AIDS?" I paused. "Yeah, especially if the guy asks—as his last request—if you'll have unsafe anal intercourse with him," I said, and "you do."

Others just ask. When my first doctor inquired how I contracted HIV (as did the next 22), he claimed it was for "medical" reasons. Now, I've learned to answer in a way that makes doctors glance up from their notes and actually look at me. I say, "My mother was an IV-drug using Haitian prostitute who bit me every time I breastfed, and my father was a gay hemophiliac. But it may have been a mosquito. See, once I was in Africa researching the anal retentiveness of a rare breed of monkeys..." The doc usually interrupts me with a stern look or a patronizing laugh as if to say, "You poor, pathetic thing."

So this "how did you get it" line of inquiry irks me, deriving as it does from our Puritan-minded obsession with individual sin. In this hierarchy of AIDS innocence, children are the ultimate victims. Lesser innocents are hemophiliacs, blood-transfusion recipients and rape survivors. A few rungs below but still on this ladder to grace are married women infected by their husbands. If he was a hemo, got bad blood or raped, good for you. But if he fooled around with other women, you made a lousy choice in a mate, didn't you? Even worse is if your husband is a hidden homosexual or bisexual and had sex with a man once in his life.

The next circle of hell is crowded with all the sluts who get infected. It doesn't matter that you've had only two lovers in your life, and the second became your husband. You have three children

and go to church on Sunday and you're white! You're still a slut. If you've ever shot up or turned a trick, you're about as low a specimen as humanity has to offer.

Forgive my sarcasm. As a person who has disclosed countless times to groups as diverse as the Young Women's Christian Association in Texarkana and the local chapter of the National Rifle Association, I know that these distinctions make all the difference. Why? I'm a Renaissance woman when it comes to HIV infection: My husband died of AIDS…but before that, we were fond of anal intercourse, among many other great sex practices. No, I don't know how he got it, but one time he was at a bank, and these guys came in with guns…I'd never even heard of the word AIDS back when we were together. But during sex, he liked me to inject cocaine directly into his penis. Then I used the same needle to inject cocaine into my vein. But I cleaned the works with peroxide—doesn't that make me a responsible citizen? And there's more…yes, I admit it, I was a prostitute. (I prefer the phrase fantasy facilitator.) But I tried not to get any bodily fluids on me; you develop a real aversion to the stuff. I wasn't in the business long before I became a dominatrix exchanging fluid only when a client drank my wee-wee…

It's hopeless: Tell the truth, and as a ninth-grader once put it after my talk, I'm "a worthless whore who should be taken out back and shot." So I learned my lesson. I used to give an abbreviated version—that I was probably infected by my husband, period. (Call me sentimental.) But after a long discussion with one of my best bug-infested girlfriends, we concluded we'll never really know. So now I keep it simple: I say, "I was infected by semen, vaginal secretion, blood or breast milk that entered my bloodstream through the vagina, rectum, mouth or needlestick." That says it all.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/immaculate-infection