Living with HIV

HIV and Language

Despite tremendous advances in HIV treatment and prevention, HIV-related stigma persists, which is why the language and terms we use to describe HIV and AIDS as well as people living with HIV matter. Certain words can help foster positive attitudes about people living with HIV while other words and phrases we choose can fuel stereotypes, stigma and discrimination.

Using people-first language can help reduce HIV-related stigma because it focuses on people rather than their health status and presents a more respectful portrayal of individuals.

The concept of people-first language was first introduced in 1983 when a group of HIV activists created "The Denver Principles," a self-empowerment manifesto that began as follows:

> "We condemn attempts to label us as 'victims,' which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally 'patients,' which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are 'people with AIDS.'"

People-first language is also free of the kinds of value judgments about a person's behavior that may put them at greater risk of contracting HIV. In addition, using gender- inclusive language can help lessen stigma surrounding HIV while also helping to promote gender equality and eliminate gender bias. We can better support those living with—and at risk of contracting—HIV by choosing our words carefully and accurately.

Stigmatizing Language	Preferred Language
HIV/AIDS	Be specific. Are you referring to HIV, AIDS or both?
HIV-infected person, HIVers, HIV or AIDS carrier, victim, sufferer	Person living with HIV or AIDS. Emphasize the person not their diagnosis.
HIV or AIDS patient	Client or member of the HIV community
Died of AIDS	Died of an AIDS-related illness, AIDS-related complications or end-stage HIV
Full-blown AIDS	AIDS or end-stage HIV. AIDS has no stages.
HIV infections	HIV acquisitions, transmissions, cases or diagnoses
Contaminated or infected with HIV	Contracted or acquired HIV or diagnosed with HIV
Catch, contract or transmit AIDS or catch HIV	Contract, transmit or acquire HIV. AIDS is not transmitted, and HIV is not something you catch
Coinfect	Contract, transmit or acquire multiple viruses
Serodiscordant couple	Serodifferent or mixed-status couple

Stigmatizing Language	Preferred Language
HIV-exposed infant	Infant exposed to HIV
AIDS orphan	Children orphaned by the loss of parents or guardians who died of AIDS-related complications
Compliant or noncompliant	Adherent or nonadherent is more positive and proactive.
HIV is a death sentence, fatal or a life-threatening condition.	HIV is a chronic, manageable health condition that can be serious for people not in care or treatment.
Prevent HIV infection	Reduce the risk of contracting or acquiring HIV
Unprotected or unsafe sex	Sex without a condom, sex without the use of PrEP or sex without an undetectable viral load. Be specific.
Prostitute; prostitution	Sex worker; transactional sex or the sale of sexual services
Promiscuous	Having more than one sexual partner
Tainted needles; tainted blood	Shared needles or equipment; blood containing HIV
Clean or dirty	Avoid these terms. HIV has nothing to do with one's hygiene.
Drug user/addict	Person who uses drugs or who has a substance use disorder
A transgender, transgendered	Person who is transgender, person of trans experience
Biological sex	Assigned gender at birth
Incorrect or assumed pronouns	Use correct pronouns. If unsure, ask.
Sex change operation/surgery	Gender-affirming surgery
Changed gender or sex	Transitioned
Gendered terms (mailman, manmade)	Use inclusive terms (mail carrier, made by humans)

Stigmatizing Language**:**
HIV/AIDS

Preferred Language Be specific. Are you referring to HIV, AIDS or both?

Stigmatizing Language**:**
HIV-infected person, HIVers, HIV or AIDS carrier, victim, sufferer

Preferred Language Person living with HIV or AIDS. Emphasize the person not their diagnosis.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
HIV or AIDS patient

Preferred Language Client or member of the HIV community

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Died of AIDS

Preferred Language Died of an AIDS-related illness, AIDS-related complications or end-stage HIV

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Full-blown AIDS

Preferred Language AIDS or end-stage HIV. AIDS has no stages.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
HIV infections

Preferred Language HIV acquisitions, transmissions, cases or diagnoses

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Contaminated or infected with HIV

Preferred Language Contracted or acquired HIV or diagnosed with HIV

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Catch, contract or transmit AIDS or catch HIV

Preferred Language Contract, transmit or acquire HIV. AIDS is not transmitted, and HIV is not something you catch

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Coinfect

Preferred Language Contract, transmit or acquire multiple viruses

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Serodiscordant couple

Preferred Language Serodifferent or mixed-status couple

Stigmatizing Language**: HIV-exposed infant**

Preferred Language Infant exposed to HIV

Stigmatizing Language**:**
AIDS orphan

Preferred Language Children orphaned by the loss of parents or guardians who died of AIDS-related complications

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Compliant or noncompliant

Preferred Language Adherent or nonadherent is more positive and proactive.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
HIV is a death sentence, fatal or a life-threatening condition.

Preferred Language HIV is a chronic, manageable health condition that can be serious for people not in care or treatment.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Prevent HIV infection

Preferred Language Reduce the risk of contracting or acquiring HIV

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Unprotected or unsafe sex

Preferred Language Sex without a condom, sex without the use of PrEP or sex without an undetectable viral load. Be specific.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Prostitute; prostitution

Preferred Language Sex worker; transactional sex or the sale of sexual services

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Promiscuous

Preferred Language Having more than one sexual partner

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Tainted needles; tainted blood

Preferred Language Shared needles or equipment; blood containing HIV

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Clean or dirty

Preferred Language Avoid these terms. HIV has nothing to do with one’s hygiene.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Drug user/addict

Preferred Language Person who uses drugs or who has a substance use disorder

Stigmatizing Language**:**
A transgender, transgendered

Preferred Language Person who is transgender, person of trans experience

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Biological sex

Preferred Language Assigned gender at birth

Stigmatizing Language**:**
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Preferred Language Use correct pronouns. If unsure, ask.

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Sex change operation/surgery

Preferred Language Gender-affirming surgery

Stigmatizing Language**:**
Changed gender or sex

Preferred Language Transitioned

Stigmatizing Language**:** **Gendered terms (mailman, manmade)**	
Preferred Language	Use inclusive terms (mail carrier, made by humans)

This language chart was adapted from guidelines created for and by people living with HIV from CAN Community Health and Positive Women's Network—USA. Special thanks to Vickie Lynn, MSW, MPH; Venita Ray, JD; Valerie Wojciechowicz; CAN Community Health; and Positive Women's Network–USA. Click here to read more about people-first language and reducing stigma in HIV communication.

Here are some additional resources on language and HIV:

A Guide to Talking About HIV (CDC)

UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines (UNAIDS)

NIAID HIV Language Guide (NIAID)

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