



# FROM RISK TO REASONS

Empowering conversations with  
women about HIV prevention



# THIS GUIDE IS FOR YOU

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Too often, women are left out of the HIV conversation.

Start conversations and get more information.

Because your health, your voice, your choice matters.

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We deserve to have all the information about HIV and prevention, to take control of our sexual health, and feel confident speaking up for ourselves.

When it comes to women and sexual health, there's a lot of stigma and harmful language that's not only sexist, it's also misogynistic and places blame where there shouldn't be. So let's shatter stigma and assumptions with language and information that empowers all women.



# FROM RISK TO REASONS



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# REFRAMING RISK: OUR CALL TO ACTION



“ WE MUST REFRAME RISK...

BECAUSE NO MATTER WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE, WHAT YOUR CURRENT SITUATION IS OR WHAT YOUR BACKGROUND IS, YOU STILL HAVE A RIGHT TO GOOD HEALTH AND TO HIV PREVENTION THAT WORKS FOR YOU.”

“ WE MUST REFRAME RISK...

TO SPEAK ABOUT HIV PREVENTION OPENLY, WITHOUT ANY SENSE THAT THERE'S ANYTHING SHAMEFUL OR ANYTHING TO BE AFRAID OF.”



“ WE MUST REFRAME RISK...

TO REDUCE STIGMA AND SUPPORT SEX POSITIVE CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS AND WOMEN.”



“ WE MUST REFRAME RISK...

TO GIVE WOMEN THEIR POWER IN THE CONVERSATION. SO THEY CAN ASK FOR WHAT THEY NEED AND BE MET WITH UNDERSTANDING.”



Go behind the scenes and hear why we are reframing risk.

# The women working to reframe risk

## Where Risk to Reasons started

HIV disproportionately impacts Black women and other women of colour in the USA. ViiV Healthcare launched Positive Action for Women (PAFW) in 2016, where community advisors and partners in the US emphasised the need to reframe conversations about HIV prevention away from discussing a woman's risk of acquiring HIV to her reasons for HIV prevention, and to do this in ways that resonate for this group of women. Advocates across the USA supplied questions, insights and recommendations, and in 2021, with the establishment of the Black Women's Working Group, Risk to Reasons was born.

Risk to Reasons showcases ViiV Healthcare's ongoing commitment to improving access to HIV prevention and care for Black women, with the goal of bringing them together to better understand their circumstances, challenges, and motivations to create a new framework for HIV prevention.

## Continuing the conversation: Risk to Reasons, UK

In 2025, a women's working group was established to bring Risk to Reasons to the UK. They bring a wealth of knowledge and unwavering commitment to the initiative. They're clinicians, community advocates, experts and researchers. Together, they discussed frameworks, approaches and messages to increase women's awareness, knowledge and participation in HIV prevention and care strategies.



**THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRULY HEARD. NOT SHAPED TO FIT BUT ACCEPTED AS WE ARE. NOT JUST THROUGH BEHAVIOUR, BUT BY ASKING WHY BARRIERS EXIST IN THE FIRST PLACE."**

Samantha Telemaque



Find out more about Risk to Reasons here.

## Meet the women working to reframe risk in the UK



**Dr Vanessa Apea**  
Consultant in Genitourinary Medicine and HIV, Honorary Senior Lecturer at Queen Mary University of London.



**Ama Appiah**  
Regional Medical Director – Patient Engagement at ViiV Healthcare. HIV Pharmacist.



**Susan Cole-Haley**  
Health writer, broadcaster and public speaker. Co-Founder & Executive Director of Phoenix Health Movement. Board member of The Global Network of People Living with HIV.



**Victoria Cristancho**  
Health and Wellbeing Lead at AYMAR Social Enterprise, Driving Inclusive Health and Resilience Strategies for Underrepresented Communities.



**Pamela Menzies-Banton**  
Women4Women Co-ordinator at Positive East.



**Sarah Mulindwa**  
Sexual Health Nurse. Presenter and broadcaster.



**Iris Noor**  
Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing Peer Coach.



**Dr Nneka Nwokolo**  
Head of Global Patient Engagement at ViiV Healthcare. Consultant in HIV and Sexual Health.



**Juddy Otti**  
Head of HIV Services at African Advocacy Foundation.



**Grace Shinwell**  
ViiV Healthcare industrial placement student, Advocate.



**Dr Annabel Sowemimo\***  
Community Sexual & Reproductive Health Consultant, Author, Academic, Activist.



**Sophie Strachan**  
CEO of Sophia Forum.



**Samantha Telemaque**  
Education and Wellbeing Coordinator, specialising in Sexual Health, HIV Prevention, and Community Engagement.

\*Photographer: Tom Trevatt

# RISK



# ISN'T THE

# WHOLE



# STORY

**It's time to talk about HIV  
in a way that reflects how  
we truly live.**

**That means recognising  
that prevention looks  
different for everyone.**

We're professionals, partners, parents. We juggle expectations. We navigate systems that don't prioritise us. So when HIV conversations focus on "risky behaviour," we ignore them because they reinforce harmful stereotypes that don't feel true to us and we miss out on the chance for meaningful support.

We deserve better conversations that fit our lives and needs. For some, prevention means condoms; for others, it's PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) or PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis), and for those living with HIV, it could be maintaining an undetectable viral load to prevent onward transmission. Every option matters, and every woman should hear about them in a way that makes sense for her.

When we talk about HIV, we should be informed about the options that fit our lives, reflect our desires, and respect our choices.

Because this isn't about what's risky, it's about our reasons for prevention.



# Facing the facts and figures

## What is HIV?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that weakens the immune system. Without treatment, it can lead to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), which is a condition where the body is unable to fight serious infections.

But, with the right medicine, people living with HIV who have an undetectable viral load can't pass on HIV via sexual contact.

## What are the symptoms?

Some people may get flu-like symptoms shortly after infection, which could include fever, sore throat, tiredness and/or a rash. However, most people have no symptoms. That's why regular testing is important.

## How is HIV passed on?

There are a lot of myths out there, but HIV is generally only passed on via:

- + Sex without a condom
- + Sharing needles/injecting equipment
- + Although rare in the UK, during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding, in the absence of treatment



## Global statistic.

**39.9M<sup>1</sup>**

people living with HIV globally.

**53%**

are women and girls.

## Snapshot of the UK.

**107K<sup>2</sup>**

people living with HIV in the UK.

**35%**

of those diagnosed are women.

## PrEP Uptake.

**WOMEN<sup>3</sup>**

are less likely to be offered PrEP despite being eligible according to national guidelines.

**2.8%**

of PrEP users in England are women, even though cis-gender women make up a quarter of all new HIV diagnoses.

<sup>1</sup>HIV.gov. Global HIV & AIDS statistics overview. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services; 2024. Available from.

<sup>2</sup>National AIDS Trust. UK HIV statistics. London: National AIDS Trust; 2024 Aug 20. Available from.

<sup>3</sup>UK Health Security Agency. HIV testing, PrEP, new HIV diagnoses and care outcomes for people accessing HIV services: 2024 report. UKHSA; published October 2023. Available from.

# MOTIVATING REASONS FOR HIV PREVENTION

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01 YOUR SITUATION

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02 INTIMACY AND HEALTH

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03 TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF



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WHAT YOU CAN DO

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# 01. YOUR SITUATION

Our health decisions are influenced by many things including our heritage, age, sex, gender identity, religion, medical or family history. They're shaped by whether we're workers, carers, mothers, trying to get by in systems that weren't built with us as a priority. Sometimes we don't get much of a say in decisions about our health or don't feel able to talk about it, especially in the face of inequality, lack of stability and unpredictable situations. We should be able to make choices that give us control and autonomy.



## How do our lives shape our health decisions?



**TAKING CARE OF MY HEALTH IS HOW I SHOW LOVE AND RESPECT FOR MYSELF."**



**AS WOMEN, WE OFTEN PRIORITISE THE COMFORT AND WELLBEING OF OTHERS. THIS IS ABOUT TAKING CARE OF ME."**



**MY KIDS ARE MY REASON FOR BEING. HIV PREVENTION KEEPS ME HEALTHY FOR THEM."**

**Do you feel like you have enough time to prioritise your health?**

**Think about the roles you do every day.**

+ What are your priorities?

+ Where does your health rank on that list?

+ Do you have any time or energy left for yourself?

+ What drives you to keep healthy?

**Do your relationships make it easier or harder to make decisions?**

**Think of all types of relationships - parents, partners, in-laws.**

+ Are there unspoken rules and power dynamics that impact your decisions?

+ Would being able to discuss and choose the right HIV prevention method help you feel in control of your health?

**How does your situation shape your health choices?**

**Think about habits and systems you have in place.**

+ How do things like money, work, housing, or immigration status affect your access to care?

+ Do you feel like you make health choices that work for you or do they just work for the people around you?

+ What ways can you take care of your health regardless of your situation?

**Are your experiences being understood and addressed?**

**Think about what does and doesn't make you feel cared for.**

+ Have you ever had to explain yourself more than once to a healthcare professional?

+ Do you feel unheard?

+ Does your culture or identity affect how you're treated?

+ Is there something that would help you feel heard and respected?

# 02. INTIMACY AND HEALTH

Stigma can silence women and prevent them from accessing the information and care they need. But, when we speak openly and listen without judgement, we create a supportive environment that works for each woman. Women need space to talk openly, without fear, shame, or assumptions.



## How do our relationships and environments shape our access to healthcare?



**MY REASON FOR HIV PREVENTION? IT'S ABOUT BEING LISTENED TO AND HAVING MY VOICE HEARD."**



**SEX SHOULD BE FUN. IT SHOULDN'T ADD STRESS TO YOUR LIFE."**



**HIV PREVENTION CAN PUT YOUR MIND AT EASE AND LET YOU EXPLORE YOUR SEXUALITY SAFELY AND ON YOUR OWN TERMS."**

**Do you feel comfortable talking about protection and prevention?**

**Think about partners and healthcare professionals.**

- + Who do you feel safe talking to about your sexual health, if anyone?
- + Has the fear of being judged ever stopped you from speaking up?
- + What's helped make hard conversations easier for you?
- + Could that help make talking about HIV prevention easier too?

**Does stigma and shame stop you from asking questions?**

**Think about the times you've not asked for what you needed.**

- + Were you worried that asking questions would lead to judgement?
- + Are there things you wanted to say?
- + Did stigma and shame stop you?
- + How would it feel to ask openly and be met with respect and answers?

**Are you coming up against barriers?**

**Think about being misunderstood or dismissed.**

- + Have you ever been made to feel shame when asking about HIV prevention methods?
- + What would real support look like for you?

**Does thinking about your health include pleasure and safety?**

**Think about other aspects of your wellbeing.**

- + Do you feel comfortable talking about your sexual wellbeing?
- + Do you know all your prevention options? How would you prevent an unplanned pregnancy or reduce the chance of a sexual infection? Have you thought about this for HIV?
- + Have you ever felt dismissed when trying to talk about your sexual health needs?
- + Would knowing more about prevention options help you feel confident in your choices?

# 03. TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Talking about HIV prevention should feel as natural as any other conversation about healthcare. But for many women, their health is pushed to the bottom of the list. Shame and stigma often get in the way. All healthcare settings should feel safe and be a place where women can ask questions, share concerns, and make decisions without fear or judgement.



## How do our healthcare experiences shape our wellbeing?



**YOU ARE YOUR OWN BEST REASON.”**



**AS A MOTHER, I’LL ALWAYS PRIORITISE MY KIDS, BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN PUTTING MY HEALTH LAST.”**



**I’M THE ONE IN CHARGE OF MY BODY. PRACTISING PREVENTION IS ONE OF THE WAYS I SHOW MYSELF LOVE.”**

**Do you feel heard and seen by your healthcare provider?**

Think about your experiences.

- + Have you ever felt rushed, judged, or invisible on a health visit?
- + Did that experience make you hesitate to go back?
- + What would make healthcare feel safe and welcoming for you?

**Do you consider your whole self?**

Think about your identity, culture, values and beliefs.

- + Do you feel your healthcare provider understands your background and values?
- + Have you ever felt you had to simplify or hide parts of yourself to be taken seriously?
- + What kind of care would feel more personal and respectful?

**Can you talk to your GP about HIV prevention?**

Think about what you want to know.

- + What are your reasons for thinking about HIV prevention?
- + Would you share any with your GP?
- + Do you know your options for HIV prevention?
- + How would it feel to get the support and information you need?

**What does it look like to put your health first?**

Think about what stands in the way.

- + What stops you from focusing on your wellbeing?
- + What support or encouragement would help you show up for yourself?
- + If you saw a friend not putting their health first, how would you support them?

# Key moments for prevention

There's a myth that HIV isn't something that affects women. But the facts are clear: HIV impacts women. These moments for prevention offer opportunities to make choices that fit your life and protect your health.

## How can I protect myself?

### PREVENTION

**“Prevention doesn't leave your health in other people's hands, it's you taking charge and taking care of yourself.”**

**It's not one-size-fits-all. Whether that's using condoms, exploring medications like PrEP, or PEP. Think about your routine, situation, relationships, and priorities.**

#### What is PrEP?

PrEP stands for **pre-exposure prophylaxis**. It's a medicine that significantly reduces the chance of acquiring HIV via sexual contact and is taken before someone may come into contact with HIV. There are different kinds of PrEP and a healthcare provider will be able to discuss these options with you.

#### What is PEP?

PEP stands for **post-exposure prophylaxis** and involves taking anti-HIV medications within 72 hours of a potential HIV exposure to significantly reduce the chance of transmission.

For PEP to be most effective, it must be started as soon as possible.

Condoms create a physical barrier that stops exchange of bodily fluids, preventing HIV and other STIs. They need to be used correctly at every sexual encounter.

### GET TESTED

**“Getting tested helped me understand what was right for me.”**

**You always know where you stand and have the most up to date information to look after your health. Reminder: Testing should feel informative, supportive, and free from judgement.**

You can get tested for HIV in a variety of convenient and confidential ways across the UK. Free testing is available through the NHS at sexual health clinics, also known as GUM (genitourinary medicine) clinics, which are open to everyone regardless of age, gender, or background.

You can also request a test through your GP. For added privacy and convenience, the NHS offers free self-sampling kits that can be ordered online and used at home.

Whether in person or by post, testing is quick, easy, and a vital step in taking control of your health.

### TREATMENT AS PREVENTION

**“Treatment means I live a healthy life and can't pass HIV on.”**

**For people living with HIV, treatment allows them to live long healthy lives and achieve an undetectable viral load. This means the HIV is suppressed to the point it cannot be measured in their blood and it can't be passed on through sex. We call this Undetectable = Untransmittable, or U=U.**

#### What is Treatment as Prevention?

Treatment as Prevention means that people living with HIV take medicine to care for their health - and in doing so, they also help prevent passing HIV to others.

When someone takes HIV medicine exactly as prescribed, it can lower the amount of HIV in their body to levels so low that standard tests can't detect it. This is called having an **undetectable viral load**. When HIV is undetectable, it cannot be passed on through sex. This is known as U=U, which stands for Undetectable = Untransmittable.



### SPEAK UP

**“They didn't think HIV could affect 'someone like me' until I asked the question. You don't need to wait for someone else to bring it up.”**

**Open conversations with your healthcare provider about your needs, concerns, and goals create the best care experience. Did you talk about HIV in your last appointment?**

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The best thing you can be in any type of relationship is your own advocate.

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This is where you build the knowledge you need to identify and communicate your needs to healthcare providers and establish a supportive relationship to help you achieve your sexual, general health and get your HIV prevention needs met.

Remember, you have the right to have your needs met, even if it doesn't always feel like it. Taking care of yourself is not just about health; it's about embracing your right to feel good and live your way confidently.

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When was the last time you thought about your health?

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**WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT?**

Eating healthier?  
Moving more?  
Feeling less stressed?  
Being more spiritual?

**DID YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR SEXUAL HEALTH?**

If not, why do you think that is?  
We're getting better at talking about wellbeing.  
But sexual health still gets left out.

**REMEMBER, YOUR REASONS FOR HIV PREVENTION ARE PART OF YOUR HEALTH.**

You deserve to have the facts, the tools, and the power to take care of yourself. Check-in on your health whether you feel good, bad, or a little in the middle.

# Navigating conversations

We navigate tough conversations at home, at work, with our partners, our friends, our kids, and with our healthcare providers. Sometimes, the hardest thing to talk about is our own health, but it's often also the most important. Being prepared with the right questions and using the I.C.E. method can help with your next appointment.

## IDEAS

### What do you think is going on?

We know our own bodies better than anyone. Help your healthcare providers understand your perspective, share what you've noticed and what you think is happening.

### What you could say:

- "I've noticed some changes..."
- "I'm here to talk about HIV prevention. I want to understand my options."
- "I've been thinking about my reasons for HIV prevention and want to discuss them."

## CONCERNS

### What's worrying you?

Whether it's physical symptoms, relationship dynamics, or fears about judgement or stigma, your concerns are valid and worth saying out loud. Give your healthcare provider the whole picture.

### What you could say:

- "I'm nervous about being judged."
- "I'm anxious about getting tested."
- "I'm worried about my symptoms."

## EXPECTATIONS

### What do you want to get from this appointment?

Sometimes we leave with more unanswered questions than we started with. Be upfront about what you expect so it can happen. That could be tests, advice, medication, or a space to talk openly.

### What you could say:

- "I'd like to get tested and ask some questions about PrEP."
- "I want to understand if there are prevention options that would work for me."
- "I need your advice on..."

**REMEMBER:** Your health isn't just about symptoms and tests, it's about how you feel, what you want to know, and what support looks like for you.

# Managing "What if?"

Stigma creates silence. As women, we've been taught to fear many things about our bodies. The "What if?" and "What will they think?" can stop people from reaching out for help and accessing the tools they need to stay healthy.

"Catching a cold" doesn't affect how people perceive us, but "sexually transmitted infections" can trigger unfair assumptions and stigmas about our values, who will love us, and our worth as individuals.



# WHAT'S YOUR REASON?



WE ARE NOT THE RISK.  
WE ARE THE REASON.  
JOIN US. SPEAK UP. LET'S  
REFRAME RISK TO REASONS.



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