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
- HIV/AIDS
- HIV-infected person, HIVers, HIV or AIDS carrier, victim, sufferer
- HIV or AIDS patient
- Died of AIDS
- Full-blown AIDS
- HIV infections
- Contaminated or infected with HIV
- Catch, contract or transmit AIDS or catch HIV
- Coinfect
- Serodiscordant couple

### Preferred Language
- Be specific. Are you referring to HIV, AIDS or both?
- Person living with HIV or AIDS. Emphasize the person not their diagnosis.
- Client or member of the HIV community
- Died of an AIDS-related illness, AIDS-related complications or end-stage HIV
- AIDS or end-stage HIV. AIDS has no stages.
- HIV acquisitions, transmissions, cases or diagnoses
- Contracted or acquired HIV or diagnosed with HIV
- Contract, transmit or acquire HIV. AIDS is not transmitted, and HIV is not something you catch
- Contract, transmit or acquire multiple viruses
- Serodifferent or mixed-status couple
Stigmatizing Language
HIV-exposed infant
AIDS orphan
Compliant or noncompliant
HIV is a death sentence, fatal or a life-threatening condition.
Prevent HIV infection
Unprotected or unsafe sex
Prostitute; prostitution
Promiscuous
Tainted needles; tainted blood
Clean or dirty
Drug user/addict
A transgender, transgendered
Biological sex
Incorrect or assumed pronouns
Sex change operation/surgery
Changed gender or sex
Gendered terms (mailman, manmade)

Preferred Language
Infant exposed to HIV
Children orphaned by the loss of parents or guardians who died of AIDS-related complications
Adherent or nonadherent is more positive and proactive.
HIV is a chronic, manageable health condition that can be serious for people not in care or treatment.
Reduce the risk of contracting or acquiring HIV
Sex without a condom, sex without the use of PrEP or sex without an undetectable viral load. Be specific.
Sex worker; transactional sex or the sale of sexual services
Having more than one sexual partner
Shared needles or equipment; blood containing HIV
Avoid these terms. HIV has nothing to do with one’s hygiene.
Person who uses drugs or who has a substance use disorder
Person who is transgender, person of trans experience
Assigned gender at birth
Use correct pronouns. If unsure, ask.
Gender-affirming surgery
Transitional
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: **Incorrect or assumed pronouns**
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)

Last Reviewed: February 1, 2022