

FAQ's for Nursing Students Living with HIV

The Association of Nurses in AIDS Care gets many phone calls from individuals infected with HIV that are considering nursing as a career. The following are questions are often asked by prospective nursing students.

Can I be a nurse?

Absolutely! Your HIV status does not preclude you from pursuing a nursing career. You do not need to ask anyone's permission (e.g. Board of Nursing, School of Nursing, your physician).

Do I need to disclose my HIV status to the School of Nursing?

Disclosure is a personal issue. Who you decide to share your HIV status with is your business. You are not obligated to share your status with the School of Nursing. You are protected under the American Disabilities Act against being discriminated against as a result of your HIV status. If you feel that you have been discriminated against seek legal counsel.

What if they ask me about my HIV status on a preadmission physical?

Do not lie, but do not offer additional information. Unless they actually ask you about your status you are not obligated to disclose.

Am I placing patients at risk because of my HIV status?

No. Some people think that an HIV+ nurse is at risk for infecting their patients. This is absurd if you remember the ways that HIV is spread – through blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. This would mean that you would have to be sharing needles, having sex, and/or sharing your blood and breast milk with your patients.

Are there things that I need to be concerned about as an HIV+ nursing student?

It is your responsibility to protect your own health. Be aware that in the clinical environment you could be exposed to pathogens that may prove detrimental to someone with decreased immune function (e.g. tuberculosis). It would be in your best interest to proactively discuss with your HIV specialist any extra precautions that you need to consider in the clinical setting. You may also want to consider how you will respond to an instructor who has assigned you to care for a patient that has a pathogen that could prove harmful to you.

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Do I have to take any extra “precautions” when caring for a patient because I am HIV+?

As stated previously there is little risk of you infecting another person with HIV. Good handwashing will prevent you from being exposed to harmful pathogens and protect your patient as well from being exposed to hospital based pathogens.

What if I get a needle stick during one of my clinical rotations?

In the event that you have an occupational exposure (stick yourself with a contaminated needle while caring for a patient) during a clinical rotation the patient may be tested for HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C depending on the hospital policy. The hospital should let you know the results of the test. You should contact your provider and let them know about the needle stick. Your greatest risk is potential exposure to a resistant strain of HIV, and if exposed you will need to be closely monitored by your physician. Please note that with standard precautions and engineering controls, such as needless systems, occupational exposures are a rare event.

Do State Board’s of Nursing have regulations regarding HIV+ nurses?

We recommend that you know what the laws are in your particular state regarding HIV+ healthcare workers. The clinic where you are treated should be aware of legal services in your area that can help you understand the laws in your particular state. In some states you **MUST** report your HIV status to the Board of Nursing. Failure to report your status in those states can result in legal action so it behooves you to know the interpretation of the law in the state in which you reside.

If you should have any further questions please feel free to contact the chairperson of ANAC’s HIV+ Nurse Committee. The national office can put you in touch with this person.