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Considering Going Back to Work

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Many people living with HIV are living longer, healthier lives because of the success of newer HIV medications. In addition, newer HIV drugs often have less serious or troublesome [side effects](#) than older ones. Therefore, many people living with HIV who may have felt very ill and unable to work when first diagnosed may now feel well enough to consider returning to work.

Note: *Most of the information below applies to the United States.*

Are You Ready to Return to Work?

Returning to work and feeling productive can boost your confidence as well as your income, and help you feel better about yourself. However, the idea of re-entering the workforce can also trigger fears and

concerns. Before you jump in, here are a few simple questions to help you get started:

- What does your healthcare provider think about you returning to work? Your provider's thoughts on your readiness for work, including what type of work and how many hours per week, will likely be based on your overall health and trends in your [CD4](#) (T-cell) count and [viral load](#).
- Have you tested your stamina (long-lasting energy level)? Many job counselors recommend volunteering for a while to build up to full-time work. If you volunteer for an organization that you like, you might be offered a job there in the future. Start with a part-time schedule and gradually add more hours per week to test your energy levels. If you are going to volunteer, please check the laws around volunteering in your state and collecting social security disability insurance (SSDI). Some states allow volunteering while other states do not, and you may lose benefits if you are found to have violated the law in your state.
- Why do you want to work? "I need a job for the money" is a good reason to work, but not the only one. Many people living with HIV who work report that the structure of a job helps them [adhere](#) to their treatment (take HIV drugs correctly) and maintain a healthy lifestyle. For others, a job provides a sense of purpose or a social group with a sense of belonging that can be a type of family. What do you want your work to do for you?
- Do you have enough [support](#) at home, or in your close circle of friends? If work makes it more difficult to fit in some of your daily chores, will you have help from family or friends?
- How will work affect your ability to get [public benefits](#), e.g., Social Security?
- How will potential [health insurance](#) through an employer affect your ability to stay with your current healthcare providers?
- Is the work you are considering likely to be performed remotely (from home) or in person? If in person, what health precautions (e.g., related to COVID-19 or other viral illnesses) might your future employer require? If your future employer does not take such precautions, do you feel comfortable working there in person?
- If in person, how will you get to/from work? If you will take public transportation, do you feel comfortable with the health precautions taken by your local transit system?
- One final thing to consider: If you share your HIV status in public settings as part of your work, it is very difficult to make it private again moving forward. While it is always possible to ask a media outlet to remove your name and identifying information, they are outside your control and may not agree to do so. Once something is public, there is always the possibility that it can be found in print somewhere, often when least expected. It is a good idea to take all of this into consideration; remember, you do not have to do anything you do not want to, or that you feel could jeopardize your own safety. There are still a lot of ways you can support the community at large without disclosing your own status, especially if you live in a rural community.

What Work Do You Want to Do?

If you identify what type of work you want to do, and what you hope to get from working, you may be more likely to find a job. You may want to think about what you expect to learn, how it might expand your skills, and what benefits you could enjoy from working.

It may also help to consider:

- Your personality and skills, so that you can match what you like to do with the job description
- What type of work you like to do. Work you enjoy gives you energy, while work you dislike drains your energy
- Talking with other people living with HIV who are working – about their jobs, their routines, their challenges and successes

Some people may feel better but not well enough to return to their usual line of work. In this case, it may be helpful to think about returning to school or being retrained. In the US, each state has a vocational rehabilitation (training for a different job) program that helps people with disabilities be

retrained or find appropriate work. For more information on these options, please see our fact sheet on [considering education or training](#).

Some people may also want to consider starting their own business. A small online shop using a platform like Etsy or Facebook Marketplace can be a great place to start. The [US Chamber of Commerce](#) and/or the [US Small Business Administration](#) may offer helpful resources for thinking about starting a business.

Applying for a Job

In the US, people with disabilities, including HIV, are protected from job discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In other words, your HIV status is confidential (private). You do not have to [disclose](#) your status to a possible or current employer. If you have not had any HIV-related symptoms or illnesses and are not on medications that are affecting your job performance, you probably do not need to tell your employer. For more details, please see our fact sheet on [rights and responsibilities in the workplace in the US](#).

Note: Each country has its own laws about HIV status and employment. In some places, living with HIV can mean you may not be hired because of your HIV status.

Here are some potential trouble spots:

- *The application form.* Some application forms ask whether you have any medical condition(s) that might interfere with your performing the job. Although you may feel an urge to disclose your status, telling an employer you are living with HIV is **not** necessary. Many people living with HIV work productively for years without HIV becoming an issue. The application form is asking for conditions that would **prevent** you from doing the job. It is not wise to apply for a job you know you cannot do. For all other jobs, the answer to this application question is "no".
- *The interview.* If you have not been working for more than a couple of months, it is important to prepare for reasonable questions about why you have not been working. Reasonable questions from an interviewer might be: "why were you out of the workplace for two years?" or "can you explain what you were doing during the five months between your job at (Company 1) and your job at (Company 2) in 2011?" These questions can be scary, but you can manage them well if you think of and practice answers ahead of time. For example, when asked about an employment gap, say calmly and confidently that "I was dealing with a family health problem."

While it is illegal for interviewers to ask questions about your medical conditions, some interviewers still do. In this case, reply simply that there is no barrier to your doing the whole job (e.g., "I can assure you that I can perform all the duties of this job.").

- *The pre-employment health survey that asks you to list all medications.* Take the form to your healthcare provider and ask him or her to complete it. You can encourage your provider to write something like, "(Your name) is under my care and takes no prescription medications that would interfere with her fulfilling the essential functions of this job." It is not necessary or recommended that you list all your medications. They are none of the employer's business.
- *The pre-employment physical.* If your new job requires a pre-employment physical or lab test, it is probably because the employer is trying to find out if you use street drugs. An HIV test would require your written consent (agreement) and be a pointless expense. You can talk with your pharmacist before you have the drug test and ask whether any of your HIV drugs can lead to a false positive test for street drugs. If so, ask for the name of an alternate drug test. Tell the tester that you need the alternate test for a valid result. You do not need to tell him or her the medication or your diagnosis.
- *Signing up for employee benefits.* If you find a job with benefits, do not lie on application forms for health, life, or disability insurance. Lying on these forms is called insurance fraud and is a

crime. If you find a direct question about HIV or other diagnosis questions, ask how your privacy or confidentiality will be protected. Only turn in the form when you get a good answer.

For a collection of job listings, organizations, programs, research, and advocacy efforts related to employment and HIV, please see our resource on [economic empowerment for people living with HIV](#).

Taking Care of Yourself

Once you find a job, it is important to remember that you were hired for your skills. Whatever you believe about disclosing your HIV status at work, keep the focus on your performance. If you want to disclose at work, you may consider waiting for a few months so that you can get to know your co-workers and get a sense of how they might respond to the news that you are living with HIV.

If you disclose to one co-worker, be prepared for all co-workers to know your status. Also, although supervisors, managers, human resources (HR) staff, and company officers in charge of employee relations may be required by law to keep your diagnosis private if you tell them, not everyone follows the laws and obeys the rules.

In the US, there are no automatic triggers for disclosing your HIV status at work. You are **not** required to disclose at work, even if:

- You are bleeding
- You need a reasonable change in the workplace or the way things are usually done so that you can continue to work. This is called an "accommodation" and is meant to help someone with a disability have the same chance to perform a job as someone without that disability. In the US, people living with HIV are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Although you are not required to disclose your status when asking for an accommodation, it is your responsibility to ask for an accommodation if you need one.
- [Side effects](#) made you late for work
- You are up for a promotion
- You need leave time to adjust to new medications

If you are thinking about going back to work or returning to a full-time job after a period of part-time employment, talk with your healthcare provider so that you have the best chance of staying healthy during your transition to work. A change in jobs or employment status is considered a major life stressor, even when the new job is a totally positive, wonderful thing. Therefore, it is important to prepare yourself by planning ahead, making sure you have sufficient support, and remembering that it is okay to go slowly and be gentle with yourself.

Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to going back to work.

- [Going Back to Work?!? \(A Girl Like Me\)](#)
- [Employment and Health \(HIV.gov\)](#)
- [Getting to Work: Value of Work \(US Department of Housing and Urban Development,...\)](#)
- [National Working Positive Coalition](#)
- [HIV Work Ready \(Positive Life NSW, Australia\)](#)
- [Working with HIV: Issues for People with HIV/AIDS Contemplating Workforce \(re\)E...](#)
- [Employment and Living with HIV/AIDS: A Resource Guide \(US Department of Labor, ...\)](#)
- [Do You Have to Disclose Your HIV Status to an Employer? \(aidsmap\)](#)
- [Phoenix Rising HIV/AIDS Project](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network](#)

- [Returning to Work with HIV: Effect on Government Benefits \(Legal Action Center\)](#)
- [HIV & Employment \(US Department of Labor\)](#)
- [Questions and Answers: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Persons with HIV...](#)



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