



# **HIV Terminology and Appropriate Language Use Guidelines**

We have seen significant advancements in HIV treatment and prevention in recent years. However, the language used when talking or writing about HIV is often outdated and stigmatising. Challenging and eliminating HIV-related stigma is a guiding principle of HIV Ireland and we understand the role appropriate language use has in this. These guidelines have been informed by our work and existing relevant language and terminology standards\*. This is a living document that will be reviewed regularly.

\*[UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines 2015](#)

| <b>Inappropriate or Incorrect Language</b>   | <b>Why?</b>  | <b>Appropriate Language or Preferred Term</b>  |
|--|--|--|
| HIV/AIDS   | This terms implies that HIV and AIDS are the same thing or that they are interchangeable. They are not.  | <b>HIV and AIDS</b><br><b>or</b><br><b>HIV or AIDS</b>   |
| HIV infections<br><br>e.g. There were 500 HIV infections this year.<br><br>e.g. PrEP is a drug that can prevent HIV infection. | The word 'infections' can be viewed as stigmatising language.  | <b>HIV transmissions</b><br><b>HIV acquisitions</b><br><b>HIV diagnoses</b><br><b>e.g. There were 500 HIV diagnoses this year.</b><br><br><b>e.g. PrEP is a drug that can prevent HIV acquisition.</b> |
| HIV infected person/<br>woman/man/mother/infant  | A person is more than their medical diagnosis.<br><br>Use 'People First Language' which puts the person before the diagnosis or label.   | <b>A person living with HIV</b><br><br><b>A person who is HIV positive</b>   |
| Catch HIV<br>Spread the Virus<br>Transmit HIV  | Implied value judgement and possible associations with blame.  | <b>Acquire HIV</b><br><br><b>Become HIV positive</b>   |
| Disclose/disclosing your HIV-positive status   | In this context, the term 'disclose' or 'disclosing' may imply that a person intentionally set out to conceal their status.  | <b>Share/sharing your HIV-positive status</b>  |
| HIV is no longer a death sentence  | A death sentence refers to a criminal prosecution.   | <b>HIV is no longer a terminal condition.</b>  |
| AIDS virus   | There is no 'AIDS virus'. The virus associated with AIDS is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).  | <b>HIV</b>   |
| AIDS victim<br>AIDS sufferer<br>HIV sufferer<br>Suffers from AIDS<br>Suffers from HIV  | The words 'victim', 'suffer' and 'sufferer' are disempowering and can imply powerlessness. People living with HIV are not victims or sufferers. The term 'AIDS' should only be used when referring to a person with a clinical AIDS diagnosis. | <b>A person living with HIV</b>  |
| AIDS Test  | There is no test for AIDS.   | <b>HIV test</b>  |
| AIDS Carriers  | No one carries AIDS. AIDS is a stage of HIV infection when a person's immune system is damaged by HIV, leaving them vulnerable to opportunistic infections.  | <b>People living with HIV</b><br><br><b>People who are HIV positive</b>  |

| <b>Inappropriate or Incorrect Language</b> | <b>Why?</b>   | <b>Appropriate Language or Preferred Term</b>   |
|--|---|---|
| Full-blown AIDS                            | This term implies there is such a thing as 'half-blown AIDS'. AIDS is simply AIDS. Referring to a term such as 'full-blown AIDS' is an unnecessary exaggeration.  | <b>AIDS</b>   |
| Died of AIDS                               | This is inaccurate. AIDS is a syndrome i.e. a group of illnesses resulting from the weakening of a person's immune system.  | <b>Died of an AIDS related illness</b>  |
| High-risk group                            | Can be stigmatising and also may imply that others are exempt from risk.  | <b>A key population vulnerable to...<br/>or<br/>People who are disproportionately affected by...</b>                                      |
| High-risk behaviour(s)                     | This term is judgemental and stigmatising.  | <b>Engaging in an action (e.g. using non-sterile injecting equipment or sex) that can make a person more vulnerable to acquiring ....</b> |
| Prostitute / Prostitution                  | These terms are very demeaning and judgemental, and the word 'prostitute' does not reflect the fact that sex work is a form of employment for a sex worker, not a way of life.                                    | <b>Sex Worker<br/>Sex Work</b>  |
| Drug Addicts / Drug Abusers                | These terms are seen as derogatory and disrespectful.   | <b>People who inject drugs.<br/>People who use drugs.</b>   |
| 'Dirty' needle                             | Can be stigmatising because it implies that HIV is dirty.   | <b>The use of non-sterile injecting equipment.</b>  |
| Men who have sex with men (MSM).           | The term MSM seeks to include men who do/may not identify as gay or bisexual and also heterosexual men who may have sex with other men. However, it's use excludes those who do self-identify as gay or bisexual. | <b>Gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men (gbMSM)</b>  |
| MSM Community or community of MSM          | Implies that all gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men belong to one specific social unit, identity, culture, values etc.  | <b>Population of...<br/>e.g. population of gbMSM</b>  |

| <b>Inappropriate or Incorrect Language</b>      | <b>Why?</b>   | <b>Appropriate Language or Preferred Term</b>   |
|---|---|---|
| Unprotected Sex                                 | An outdated term that is no longer accurate or precise when referring to reducing the risk of HIV acquisition. In addition to using condoms, people can choose a number of strategies to reduce the risk of HIV acquisition including HIV treatment and PrEP.   | <b>Sex without a Condom;<br/>Condomless Sex;<br/>Condomless Sex with PrEP;<br/>Condomless Sex without PrEP;<br/>Sex not protected by antiretroviral prevention methods.</b> |
| Safe Sex  | This term may imply complete safety. The term safer sex more accurately reflects the concept that choices and actions can be made and/or taken to reduce or minimise the risk of HIV and/or STI acquisition and transmission e.g. using condoms, using PrEP to prevent HIV, choosing to have non-penetrative sex. | <b>Safer Sex</b>  |
| Passive / Active                                | Implies sexual dominance / submission.  | <b>Top / Bottom<br/>Receptive / Insertive</b>   |
| Clean<br>(e.g. I'm clean. Are you?)             | Stigmatising of those with HIV and/or STIs. Implies that those with HIV and/or STIs are 'dirty'.  | <b>HIV negative<br/>All results clear</b>   |
| A promiscuous person                            | A judgemental term that should be avoided.  | <b>Has multiple partners</b>  |
| Prostitute<br>Hooker<br>Rent boy                | Stigmatising and offensive slang terms.   | <b>Sex worker<br/>Escort</b>  |
| Queer<br>Faggot<br>Fag                          | Stigmatising and offensive slang terms.   | <b>Gay<br/>Bisexual<br/>Likes guys</b>  |
| Tranny<br>Transsexual<br>Transgenders<br>T-girl | Outdated, slang and sometimes offensive.  | <b>Transgender<br/>Trans person<br/>Trans man<br/>Trans woman<br/>Non-binary person</b>   |
| Any racialised terms                            | Outdated and can cause offense.   | <b>People / person of colour</b>  |



**HIV Ireland**  
**70 Eccles Street, Dublin 7**  
[www.hivireland.ie](http://www.hivireland.ie)

**January 2020 (updated)**