

You've got AIDS

And so we live

February 14 is St. Valentine's Day. It's almost spring. Spring is love.

Love is sex. And trust. Sex and trust is a condom.

We want you to know this simple truth. So we prepared this article for HIV/AIDS is not something that happens to others. It is something that may happen to anyone.

Natasha does not look like someone who is HIV-positive. She never took drugs or had casual relationships. It was only for love. Natasha is a thin slender girl with dark hair and very beautiful face features. At the moment she is a sophomore at the Humanitarian Institute. She is going to be a psychologist. Natasha's parents know about her diagnosis. They are doctors, who

are knowledgeable and receptive. Natasha also told a few friends about it. Now she made up her mind to tell Yes! about it too. Natasha first met that young man at a friends' party. She was 17, and he was 22. He was a bartender, a really nice outgoing guy. Everything: interests, music, and favorite movies matched almost at once. He was very friendly, and it went well for the most part. They went out for about a year and spoke about absolutely anything, even about the mistakes that they made in the past. Natasha knew that her boyfriend took drugs at some point but that time had passed. Drugs came out of his life. Love came instead. "He did not take drugs then. It was over. He said that it was in the past, that he had hepatitis, was in the hospital, had tests, and recovered. First, before our relationship became stable, we used condoms. And then the more trust we started to have for one another, the more inclined we were that it was not necessary. I had tests every once in a while, and he (even though I did not force him to have tests) always said that he had an HIV-test but it was negative. He said it and I did not need any proof. There was no reason not to trust him. Once I incidentally went to the women's clinic, and when I asked them what the test results were (the HIV-test was one of them), the doctor said that they were being examined. I asked her what it meant, and she said that it might be something related to food or it was just unclear what the result was. She calmed me down, suggested that I retake the test, and it should be

just fine. I was thinking: what could I have eaten so that it affected the result of the HIV-test. I instantly told my mother about it and decided that if "something is wrong" (even though I was terrified to think about it) then I will not conceal anything from her. The thing is that my mother is a doctor and can tell me something about it. But mother was shocked. She is a pediatrician and did not know anything. How long will I live? Is there any treatment? She had no idea. I had the second test in my local clinic. The result was the same. They said "Don't worry, everything will be just fine. Go to the 2nd infectious hospital just in case even though it can't possibly be the case". The doctor there, however, said "You know, I've worked here long enough. Most likely you are HIV-positive". Since then my life has been divided into two: before and after that. I decided to call those people who I had intimate relationships with. Then a friend of mine said "That guy accepted it more easily than the others". He had a test, and it was also positive. Only later he admitted that as late as 1999 he was sent to the Sokolinaya Gora hospital (the same infectious hospital, where Natasha's diagnosis was confirmed **Comment by YES!**). After that we saw each other a couple of times after a year or two passed. He lives just as he has and tries to shield himself from everything so that nothing reminds him of HIV. He also dates girls. Our common friends told me that

YES!

he still does not use condoms. I got his girlfriend's telephone number and met with her. I said "I do not want to ruin or spoil anything for you whether it is love or passion but what happened to me will happen to you too". I found out that they use Pharmatex but I know that only a condom can protect you from HIV-AIDS. No matter what is written on the packages.

Realizing that she is HIV-positive did not stop Natasha's life. Two years have passed since then. She continues studying, works for the HIV-AIDS hotline, and administers a prevention program trying to protect other girls from becoming HIV-positive. «This would not have happened if we had ALWAYS used condoms. I don't, however, blame him or myself for not doing it. I think both of us should have decided to use condoms. Many guys think that a condom is necessary when you have sex with a commercial sex worker but when you have sex with your girlfriend using a condom is like eating an apple wrapped in a plastic bag. It is believed that if a girl looks good and does well at school, she cannot be HIV-positive. So guys consider condoms optional. When you are seeing a guy and feel that it is going to happen soon you should speak about protection at once. There is nothing disgraceful or shameful in it. Love is one thing, and your future life is another thing. Some live together for years without getting infected, and for some one time can be enough. Everyone has a different immune system». **Recently Natasha broke up with her HIV-Negative boyfriend who she dated for a long time. In the first days of their relationship their common friends told him about Natasha's status. It did not however stopped him from loving her. When Natasha started speaking about it, he said that he already knows everything, and that her diagnosis is not an obstacle for their relationship because he loves her and wants to be with her in spite of everything. Natasha and her boyfriend used condoms and the virus did not get transmitted. The reason for their separation was a different one. Natasha does not point it out but says that it is a common situation that could happen to any couple. Natasha is not on therapy: the amount of the virus in her body is now little, and the number of immune cells is sufficient. If the situation changes, Natasha will start to take medicine. The side effects of such therapy**

are rather serious, but the treatment is effective. Under the law HIV-positive people should be provided with this medicine for free. In real life, however, the requirements of the law are observed only in Moscow and still

when you have sex without a condom, get an injection with an infected needle, and, in some cases, from mother to a child. Many people erroneously think that HIV is transmitted like a common

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not always.

Marina decided not to have her picture taken for Yes!: only her boyfriend and four close friends know that she is HIV-positive. If somebody else finds out, Marina might have problems. Her elderly parents may get upset, and the public may not understand it right. Everybody knows that an HIV-positive person may not get medical service or a job. S/he may be expelled from the university. Most people do not know that HIV can be transmitted only

cold: through cough, a common mug or towel. So we understood Marina hoping that she excuses YES! for this black square where her picture was supposed to be. Marina has lived with HIV for five years. Since she was 18 and lost her virginity. She had a boyfriend who she loved. Not the one who was HIV-positive. They have dated since childhood. It was the first love for both of them. He was the first guy that Marina kissed. He was also the first she had other things with: caresses, hugs, strokes, everything that is commonly referred to as “petting”. The only thing they did not have was real sex. Both of them were virgins, and both of them were lost. Marina said goodbye to her boyfriend when he got drafted into the military and their relationship was over. Marina does not call her second love with this big word starting with an “L”. He loved her but she just had a crush on him. The guy was younger than Marina. She knew that he took drugs. «It did not stop me. I thought that I didn't lose my mind, which was generally the case. The possibility of offering drugs so that I could not refuse was ruled out. He treated me with great care. We went out, first in a large company then together. Knowing that he had situations when he took drugs I once asked “Have you ever been afraid of becoming HIV/AIDS-Positive”? He answered “Yes, I have. So I took drugs with my best friend”. We had hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS tests periodically. So it was like OK,

YES!

! 125

we had those tests. Everything was fine. He led me to our first sexual contact as masterfully as only guys of his age can do. He said "I love you madly. I'll do everything so well that it will be fantastic". And when I suggested that we use a condom (some of my friends even showed me how to put it on so it should not have been a problem), he said something like "A condom is nonsense. What do you need it for? I am clean and so are you". So that was it. When I entered the university, I got new friends, a new life started. So I achieved what I wanted. Except for one thing: my boyfriend started to hinder me. As a person who quit drugs he started trying to hold me. He began to call and say "I am so bad, and you are so

"I just went from one end of the subway line to the other. On the one hand, I hated him. On the other, I realized that I cannot be without him. I was 100% certain that I cannot tell anybody about it as it was unheard of".

good. I am no match for you". I did not understand what was going on but I couldn't get rid of him. He complained of a liver pain once and said that he was going to have a hepatitis test. A month or two passed, and he calls me at night and starts it all over again "I am so bad, I can't handle this anymore". I asked "What happened"? 2 am. My parents are sleeping in the room next to mine. A happy girl, who is about to get a good night sleep and go to the university, hears "You know, they found not only hepatitis". I asked "What else"? And he goes "AIDS". I stood up the next morning, went to the university, and did everything I was supposed to. I realized that starting from that moment I can show a single emotion to no one. After three days I went to have tests. It was dreadful. I just went from one end of the subway line to the other. On the one hand, I hated him. On the other, I realized that I can not be without him. I was 100% certain that I can not tell anybody about it as it was unheard of. My parents were against my seeing this guy from the very beginning. I told them that he likes me a lot, and he is just dangling after me. I concealed the rest. There was a possibility of going to the other end of town and stay with my sister at her apartment.

I bought ravioli and stuffed them into my mouth once a day. Every once in a while my university friends came over and I had to laugh and pretend that everything was OK. After a week I called the hospital to find out what the test result was. And what do you think they said? They said "Would you please call once again in a week"? I asked "Is that it"? They answered "Why is that? Anything could have happened to your test". This whole thing went on for about a month. I went to the AIDS-Center three days and could not wait in the line for my turn. The people I saw there horrified me. Five years ago all of those

people were drug-takers, getting high in those halls... You can't queue up because they do not understand anything. I was totally shocked. A girl from a good family who has always had a great deal of admirers, who has always been lucky... There was nothing that could have brought me to a place like that. It was some horrendous mistake for me. It was so unfair!!! Of course, there was something I blamed myself for. For the most part, I hated him, however, and as the doctor said "It has been determined that you are HIV-positive", I did not listen to her. I only asked one question "Doctor, can I sleep with other men"?

She said "Yes, you can". I answered "Thank you so much, Doctor" and left.

For a year and a half Marina could not look at men at all. She realized that "man=pain". Now she says "I live with it". She forgave the person who infected her. After a certain time she forgave all men. Marina is a really strong self-confident girl. She is a real adult woman for her young age. (Marina is only 23). She is really wise and cheerful in spite of everything. She is also a little strict. She is a teacher. Now she has a boyfriend. He is HIV-Negative. Marina always insists on protection. He came to Marina's life when she got desperate to be looking for love. Marina says that she froze out because of him: "This is a second love meaning that he is the second person many things with whom happen for the first time. I decided not to tell him about my HIV infection till the very end. I told him that we would either have sex with using condoms or have no sex at all. "And why?" "Because". By then I had learned to say "Because I want it this way". He agreed the condom slipped off but even that could not get me to tell him about it. I was in panic. I did not know how he would react to it. But when we had a situation like that for another time, I was really scared for him and had to tell him. He had a hard time. He did not know anything about it. He is not the kind of person you can give a brochure to so that he reads it and gets calm. He was afraid to have sex with me but he did it anyway. I admire him. So many feelings struggled within him but he managed to stop. So he is with me now".

HIV/AIDS HOTLINE

289 84 14

Where to get an anonymous test?

Moscow

366 26 70

365 0601

929 10 22 (NII SKLIF)

Other Cities

See also www.aids.ru/base

YES!

We made friends and it was heavenly. It was a Big Love with a capital "L". He also took drugs. I did not think back then that it was bad. It was in fashion. Heroin girls looked at us from magazine covers. Heroin songs played everywhere. The 1st TV channel showed Trainspotting and not everybody knew what it usually leads to. I also did not think that something bad would happen to me. I had HIV tests four times. I could not believe that it had happened. In Russia everyone spoke of HIV/AIDS as of something from abroad as though we did not have it. No it is really petrifying to see 16-year-old girls who come to help groups and have no idea about drugs or anything like that. They only had one guy, and they are HIV-positive. No one likes to think about bad things about those bad things that can happen to you, and it is a pity because it happens really easily. Drugs or HIV infection are those things that no one is fully protected against.

When my guy started spending much time out some place, I did not want to stay on my own. I wanted to be with him. I had a hard time staying home alone. And he left in order to take drugs. So once we made a bet and I took drugs for the first time. It is really typical to fall in love and get into something because of that. You fall in love and follow the person no matter where he is going. And everything he does seems wonderful..."

The "love-HIV" link in Sasha's life turned to the opposite "HIV-love" side. At the mutual help group meeting she met his future husband. His name is also Alexander. Sasha Volgin is a name that both of them share. Both of them are HIV-positive. Both of them dream of having a child. However, they can not have their own children. They can not adopt a child either. In this country HIV-positive parents can not adopt even an HIV-positive child. Such children are assigned to special orphanages where nobody needs them. Sasha, however, believes that she will formalize the adoption documents and make at least one HIV-positive child happy. She also believes that everything is going to be fine.

Sasha lives in Saint Petersburg. She came to Moscow only for one day to see the Dolphin band concert and give an interview to Yes!. Sasha loves music. She also loves love. That's what she got her present HIV-positive status from. From a mad overwhelming love that makes you lose your mind. And the ability to say "No". Sasha could not say no to her boyfriend when he suggested that they have a heroin injection. Such a strange love. The guy is now dead. He got killed because of drugs. And Sasha is alive. Nothing can kill her passion for life even HIV/AIDS.

"I had an acute infection, herpes zoster. I was horrified and went to the dermatovenerologic dispensary to have a test. Then they called and told me to come. I came. When they told IT to me, nothing but "You have AIDS, which means that we are going to die" (Zemfira, Russian pop singer) was in my mind. I realized that I would still live for some time but still die in the end. Very soon. I called my best friend and went to him. We listened to some music. I cried a little. That's how I lived through that day. When I was going to his place (he lives by the Gulf of Finland), I came up to the shore. The gulf is so large, it looks like a sea.

It all started when I fell in love with a guy. We had a great company, went to concerts, he studied in the Arts college with a friend of mine who is a photographer. He could *see* really well. I could *read* and taught him how to *read* and he taught me how to *see*. He could see beauty in a scuffed hatch. He was an animated cartoon designer. He made cartoons.

"All of us think that we are good. We believe that the boys who we love are good. We read good books and watch good movies. We study at good universities and have good loving parents. So we all think that we do not need to use condoms since we are so good that nothing bad will ever happen to us".

- • There are approximately 300 000 HIV-positive people in Russia
- • In Moscow and the Moscow region about every 20th person in the 15-30 age group is HIV-positive
- • Most people get infected by making injections while taking drugs, the heterosexual way of virus transmission increases constantly

IT IS NOT TRUE THAT

- HIV and HIV/AIDS is a problem of only drug takers, commercial sex workers, and men having sex with men;
- HIV-positive parents can not give birth to a healthy child;
- HIV is transmitted through dental tools.

IT IS TRUE THAT

- If you are HIV-positive you are entitled to free federal medical care, which will help you to live such a long life as others;
- If a condom is used in the right way, it gives a 100% protection;
- "Who found out the diagnosis first is to be blamed" – an HIV test is to be had together with a guy.

YOU CANNOT GET INFECTED

- through a kiss;
- through petting;
- through a toilet bowl;
- through shared items;
- if a guy has oral sex with you.

YOU CAN GET INFECTED

- by having sex without a condom;
- by having anal or oral sex without a condom;
- in a tattoo salon if you do not follow the necessary precaution measures (disposable needles);
- by sharing one needle and/or instruments for preparing/injecting drugs.

! 127

YES!