

Empower



**YOUR POWER,
YOUR HEALTH**

THE CONVERSATION
STARTS WITH YOU:
Young Black Women in DC
Changing the Narrative on
Sexual Health

Health
HIV





Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.¹ While sexual health is only one component of total wellness, it is critical to generational longevity, social intimacy, interaction, and interpersonal relationships.

All women face challenges in obtaining optimal sexual health in a society that prioritizes the male perspective in decision making and in the very structure of healthcare systems. However, Black women experience unique health disparities. Racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination have significantly contributed to inequitable health outcomes for women of color in areas such as cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular health. When it comes to sexual health, these inequities are even more pronounced among younger women, especially when one considers HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), intimate partner violence, and other sexual health-related concerns.²

Names, images, and incidents in the stories contained in this booklet are inspired by the lived experiences of many diverse, young Black women. Photos shown are for illustrative purposes and may not represent the individuals featured.

Your Power, Your Health elevates the experiences of Black women whose resilience, strength, and voices deserve to be at the forefront of the conversation around health topics. This booklet is a tool to awaken the collective awareness of Black women to the challenges in sexual healthcare as well as a vehicle for changing the narrative around sexual health issues.

This booklet honors the journeys of Black women of diverse ages and experiences while contributing to a future where their health and well-being are prioritized. It reflects HealthHIV and Howard University's ongoing commitment to advancing health equity and supporting communities disproportionately affected by HIV and STIs.

Learn more and get involved at the HealthHIV Empower Website:
healthhiv.org/empower.

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FROM UNCERTAINTY TO EMPOWERMENT

Jasmine's Awakening: A Young Woman's First Step Toward Health Confidence

Jasmine was the type of 20-year-old who kept everything together. School, work, and even family were always on point. But she hadn't really thought about her own routine health care. That changed when her cousin mentioned Pap tests, leaving Jasmine wondering if she was already behind. The questions lingered until she finally booked an appointment at the community clinic across town.

There, a nurse reassured her that many young women feel unsure about when to start screenings. She explained that Pap tests begin at 21, then every three years until 29, with Pap or Pap + HPV options from 30–65. The nurse also explained that sexually active women under 25 should get yearly chlamydia and gonorrhea tests, and everyone 13–64 should get at least one HIV test. "Sexual health is about confidence and knowing your body," the nurse said.

Jasmine left feeling lighter and proud—she didn't need a Pap test yet, but she now had a plan and a new sense of control. She realized caring for her health wasn't scary at all—it was empowering.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sexually active women under 25 should be screened for chlamydia and gonorrhea at least once a year (CDC, 2024). Routine checkups can detect infections like HIV early—often before symptoms appear. The CDC (2023) recommends everyone aged 13–64 get tested for HIV at least once in their lifetime, and more often if at higher risk.

Women should have at least one well-woman preventive visit each year to discuss screenings, menstrual health, contraception, and STI prevention (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2023).

 Young women often delay scheduling their first preventive visit simply because they're unsure where to start. Routine visits help detect issues early and keep your health on track.

 Having a healthy relationship with your body means understanding it and making informed choices about your well-being. Preventive care helps you take ownership of your health and stay confident in your body's strength and resilience.

Now is the time to take action. Here's three steps to help you get started on your journey to confidence and control through preventive care.

- ◆ **Acknowledge and accept that you may need screenings.**
 - ▶ *It's okay not to know everything about your health—what matters is being open to learning and taking that next step.*
- ◆ **Research clinics and options that fit your needs.**
 - ▶ *There are several ways to access preventive care: private clinics, community health centers, non-profit organizations, or student health services.*
 - ▶ *If you have insurance, check which clinics accept it and are taking new patients.*
- ◆ **Book your appointment and come prepared.**
 - ▶ *No insurance? Look for providers who offer sliding fee scales or payment plan options.*
 - ▶ *Try to schedule your appointment early—some clinics book out weeks in advance.*
 - ▶ *Write down your questions or health concerns ahead of time to make the most of your visit.*
 - ▶ *Remember: your time with your provider is for you—use it to learn, ask questions, and strengthen your relationship with your health.*

HELPFUL RESOURCES & SUPPORT SERVICES

Howard University Hospital: A leading teaching hospital providing comprehensive medical services, including primary care, specialty care, behavioral health, reproductive health, and community outreach programs. (202) 806-0006 | www.huhealthcare.com

Rooted in Wellness: A podcast mini-series exploring holistic approaches to health and well-being. effibarryinstitute.org/podcast/rooted-in-wellness

FROM FEAR TO FREEDOM

Marie's Journey to Reclaiming Power Through HIV/STI Testing

Marie, a 32-year-old Haitian woman balancing family expectations with her own vibrant life, found herself stuck in a storm of worry. Three weeks earlier, she'd had a spontaneous night out that led to unprotected sex. At first it felt exciting, but the joy faded fast, replaced by a quiet panic: Was he really "clean"? When was the last time she got tested? Didn't some STIs take weeks to show up? Those questions kept her up at night, even as she tried to push them away.

For weeks, Marie carried the weight alone. She was too nervous to get tested, too afraid of what a positive result might mean, and even more afraid of what her family would think. But eventually, she chose herself. She walked into the Women's Care Center at her local hospital, still anxious but determined. When she explained her fears, the Physician didn't judge her. Instead, she celebrated Marie's courage and reminded her,

"Knowledge is power. Knowing your body is one of the strongest tools you have."

Marie walked out of that clinic feeling lighter, more connected to her body, and proud of the step she took. Testing didn't just give her answers, it gave her peace, clarity, and a newfound sense of power.

DID YOU KNOW?

Young Black women have nearly four times the odds of having an STI compared to young White women (Cipres *et al.* 2018).

Concerns about protecting Black men, silencing Black girls and women, cultural norms and messaging about sexuality, gendered societal expectations, and sexual stereotypes are all factors that contribute to Black women's increased risk for STIs. (Crooks *et al.* 2020)



i Having a healthy relationship with your body means making the best decisions for yourself. Getting tested for HIV and STIs can provide you with the information you need to make smart choices about your sexual health. Be proactive by getting tested before having sex with any new partners, in addition to regular, annual STI testing. If you have any concerns or possible symptoms of an STI, get tested before your next sexual encounter.

i Stigma = Silence. The more people openly talk about getting tested for HIV and STIs, the less stigma will hold back people like Marie from acting sooner. Help others become knowledgeable about their sexual health—help them find their power.

Now is the time to take action. Here's three steps to help you get started on your journey to finding power and gaining knowledge through STI testing.

- ◆ **Acknowledge and accept that you could have an STI.**
 - ▶ *Take the time you need to accept your feelings. A clear mind is essential when taking the next steps.*
- ◆ **Research STI testing options in your area.**
 - ▶ *There are several options for STI testing, including: private clinics, health departments, non-profit organizations, or self-testing kits.*
 - ▶ *Consider what options could be covered by your health insurance and what makes you feel comfortable, safe, and empowered.*
- ◆ **Get STI testing.**
 - ▶ *If your testing option requires an appointment, try to schedule it for the earliest time that is convenient for you.*
 - ▶ *If your testing option allows walk-in visits, keep track of the location's open hours to find a time that works for you.*
 - ▶ *If you are using a self-testing kit, either pick one up in person at a pharmacy or clinic or order it online.*

HELPFUL RESOURCES & SUPPORT SERVICES

Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington, DC, Inc.: A trusted provider of reproductive and sexual health services, including contraception, STI testing, cancer screenings, and education, with a focus on accessibility and inclusivity. (800) 230-7526 | www.plannedparenthood.org

Empower Project Resources: healthhiv.org/empower

PREVENTION IS EMPOWERMENT

Tamara's Choice to use PrEP to Ignite a Movement

At 32, Tamara was the matriarch of her family, juggling caregiving for her aging grandmother and raising her pre-teen daughter. Between the chaos of family life, her health often took a backseat. But when a close friend confided about their HIV diagnosis, Tamara felt a nagging concern. She realized she hadn't taken steps to protect herself, especially after leaving a past relationship marked by infidelity.

Determined to be proactive, Tamara visited her local clinic. The nurse introduced her to PrEP, explaining how it could dramatically reduce her risk of contracting HIV. Tamara hesitated, unsure if it was right for her, but the nurse reassured her: "PrEP is for anyone who values their health—it's about taking control."

After starting PrEP, Tamara felt empowered in a way she hadn't before. She began discussing it with other women in her

community, breaking down misconceptions and encouraging them to explore their options.

PrEP became more than a daily pill for Tamara—it was a reminder that her health mattered too. By prioritizing her own well-being, she reclaimed her power and inspired others to do the same.

DID YOU KNOW?

In Washington, DC, Black heterosexual women account for 16% of new HIV diagnoses, which is the second-largest group affected (DC Health 2024).

Less than 2% of Black heterosexual women use PrEP (Conley et al. 2022).

As of 2019, there were about 4,000 PrEP users reported in Washington, D.C., however 14,000 PrEP users are needed to reduce new HIV cases by half (Conserve et al., 2023).

 Using PrEP isn't just about disease prevention; it's about claiming your right to an empowered sex life. Then, sharing your knowledge and experience with others to help them claim it for themselves. Let's build networks of empowered Black women, who don't just discuss HIV, but proactively work together to protect each other and their communities. It's not just about stopping HIV; it's about starting a new chapter of life, and it starts with a spark.

 Black women in DC like Tamara deserve more than survival. All Black women deserve thriving, passionate, worry-free intimacy. Let's break the silence, challenge the stigma, and protect ourselves not because we're afraid, but because we are worth it. Use protection not just as a shield, but as a key to unlocking the freedom, satisfaction, and self-love that every Black woman is entitled to.



If you're ready to light a spark in yourself and your community, here's some steps to help guide you in getting started with PrEP and changing the conversation about sexual health.

- ◆ **Discuss PrEP with a healthcare provider**
 - ▶ *Take initiation and bring up PrEP to your provider.*
 - ▶ *Ask questions about PrEP and if it would be right for you.*
 - ▶ *If you and your provider determine that it could help you take control of your sexual health, get a prescription for PrEP.*
- ◆ **Start the conversation with other Black women in your community**
 - ▶ *Some questions you could use to start the conversation include: Have you ever thought about HIV? Are you currently doing anything to prevent HIV? Have you ever heard of PrEP? What would it take for you to explore discussing PrEP with your healthcare provider?*

HELPFUL RESOURCES & SUPPORT SERVICES

HIV Prevention Resources for Black Women to Thrive:

A comprehensive resource guide designed to bridge the gaps in healthcare access for Black women.

healthhiv.org/empower



THE POWER OF PERMISSION: CONSENT COUNTS

Summer's Unfolding: The Morning After Doesn't Define Her

Summer was a 24-year-old woman sitting on the edge of her best friend's couch, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't remember what happened," she said softly. "I woke up in their house, naked. I just know... something wasn't right."

Tia didn't press for details. She didn't need to. She simply brewed a cup of tea, sat beside Summer, and said, "We'll figure this out. Together."

The next morning, they went to a clinic. Summer was tested, spoke with a trauma counselor, and for the first time, someone looked her in the eye and said the words she didn't know she needed to hear:

"This wasn't your fault."

Healing didn't happen overnight. There were days when Summer couldn't leave her bed, nights when sleep refused to come, and moments when shame crept in, uninvited and heavy. But she kept showing up for herself. For her safety. For her future.

She started therapy. She journaled. She stretched her body each morning just to remind herself that it still belonged to her. She hasn't told everyone what happened and she doesn't owe them that. What she does share now, in quiet conversations and brave spaces, is simple and strong:

"I'm still here. And trauma will not win."

That day at the clinic marked the beginning of something bigger than survival, it was the start of reclamation. The start of peace.

DID YOU KNOW?

More than 50% of Black women experience sexual coercion, inappropriate physical contact, or assault in their lifetime (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2017).

Survivors who receive trauma-informed counseling are significantly more likely to report improved mental health and safety outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023).

 Open conversations about consent and boundaries reduce the likelihood of sexual violence and increase confidence in seeking support (RAINN, 2024).

 The stories of Black women like Summer are too often buried beneath strength and silence. One in four Black girls will experience sexual abuse before age 18, and one in five Black women are survivors of rape (Barlow, 2020). Yet for every woman who reports, 15 remain unheard. This silence isn't weakness—it reflects generations of women taught to carry pain quietly under the "strong Black woman" narrative.

 But healing begins when truth is spoken. Consent is not the absence of "no," but the presence of an active, ongoing "yes." It is mutual, enthusiastic, and can be withdrawn at any time. Healthy relationships are built on trust, communication, and respect, where conversations about boundaries, testing, and safety are normalized—not avoided.

 Seeking therapy, building community, and reclaiming your voice is not weakness—it's resistance. Healing is rebellion—the loudest declaration that what was done to you will not define you. In choosing to heal, Black women transform from survivors into warriors, visionaries, and healers—reclaiming what was always theirs: peace, pleasure, and power.

Now is the time to take action. Here's three steps to help you get started on your journey toward healing, peace, and empowerment.

- ◆ **Seek trauma-informed care.**
 - ▶ *Connect with clinics, crisis centers, or organizations that offer free or low-cost counseling and sexual assault resources.*
 - ▶ *Look for providers trained in trauma-informed practice—those who understand the importance of safety, trust, and empowerment.*
- ◆ **Practice and model consent.**
 - ▶ *Have ongoing, open conversations with partners about comfort, boundaries, and safety.*
 - ▶ *Remember: consent can be withdrawn at any time—your "no" and your silence both matter.*
- ◆ **Prioritize emotional recovery.**
 - ▶ *Explore healing tools like therapy, journaling, movement, or meditation to help reconnect with your body and emotions.*

HELPFUL RESOURCES & SUPPORT SERVICES

Innergy, Inc.: A wellness organization offering behavioral health services, mentoring, and educational resources to foster personal growth and emotional well-being. (202) 400-9197

The Loveland Foundation: Provides free or low-cost therapy sessions for Black women and girls. lovelandfoundation.org

SURVIVAL COULD LOOK LIKE ME

Lanette: The Not-So-Quiet Warrior

In 2005, Lanette received a diagnosis that rocked her to her core: she was HIV positive. She was 19, a single mother to a 2-year old, a sophomore in college and terrified of what the future held. The stigma was suffocating; even close friends avoided her, and family gatherings became stilted and awkward.

For years, Lanette carried her secret like a stone in her chest, her silence fueled by fear and shame. It wasn't until she joined a support group for women living with HIV that she began to breathe again. The group became her sanctuary, a place where she could laugh, cry, and simply exist without judgment.

Fast forward to 2025, Lanette stands as a testament to survival. On stage at a national conference, she speaks with quiet strength about Treatment as Prevention and U=U, her voice unwavering as she challenges misconceptions about HIV. Lanette's life isn't perfect. The scars of her early years remain,

etched into her relationships and her sense of self. Yet, she got her Master's Degree in Social Work, wrote an autobiography, started a small non-profit agency, and her daughter is now a senior at Lynette's alma mater where they both speak openly about Black women, HIV and the hope of a stigma free existence for all.

DID YOU KNOW?

Black heterosexual women account for nearly one-fourth (23%) of all people living with HIV in Washington, D.C. (DC Health, 2024).

When taken as prescribed, antiretroviral therapy (ART) can lower the HIV viral load to undetectable levels—meaning the virus cannot be transmitted to others (U=U). (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024).

Starting HIV treatment early helps individuals live long, healthy lives while reducing community transmission and stigma. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2024).

i For many, an HIV diagnosis can feel overwhelming—but for Black women, stigma and fear within the community often make it even harder to disclose or find support. In D.C., Black heterosexual women make up nearly one-fourth of all people living with HIV. Many struggle to prioritize their own health while caring for others.

i The truth is, treatment is prevention. Starting antiretroviral therapy (ART) right away keeps the immune system strong and lowers the amount of HIV in the body to undetectable levels. When HIV is undetectable, it cannot be transmitted—this is known as U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable).



i For Black women, understanding U=U means reclaiming control, reducing stigma, and living long, healthy lives. Viral suppression isn't just about protecting others—it's about protecting yourself. With consistent treatment, motherhood, family, and purpose remain within reach.

i Like Lanette, healing begins with knowledge and strength. If you've been diagnosed with HIV, there is hope. You can live fully, love freely, and lead the way toward a stigma-free future.

If you're ready to light a spark in yourself and your community, here's some steps to help guide you towards reclaiming your health and shaping a future grounded in care and possibility.

- ◆ **Start treatment immediately after diagnosis.**
 - ▶ Ask your provider about antiretroviral therapy (ART) and discuss ways to maintain adherence to your medication schedule.
- ◆ **Stay informed and advocate.**
 - ▶ Learn about U=U and share accurate information to help reduce stigma in your community.
 - ▶ Schedule regular checkups to monitor your viral load and celebrate milestones in your health journey.
- ◆ **Build your support system.**
 - ▶ Join local or online groups for Black women living with HIV to share experiences and find encouragement.

HELPFUL RESOURCES & SUPPORT SERVICES

The Womens Collective: A nonprofit organization focused on the health and wellbeing of women, particularly those living with or affected by HIV. They provide case management, health education, and peer support. (202) 468-7979 | [womenscollective.org](https://www.womenscollective.org)

Girlfriends Podcast: A podcast dedicated to addressing the unshakable strength shown, and the unique health challenges faced by, Black women and girls, particularly in the context of HIV prevention. healthhiv.org/empower



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS UP TO YOU

Your sexual and reproductive health isn't just a checklist. It's your legacy. Just like Jasmine, Marie, Tamara, Summer, and Lanette, you have the power to decide what thriving looks like for you. Whether it's booking that Pap test, getting tested for STIs, asking your doctor about PrEP, or simply learning what consent really means, these choices aren't just about prevention. They're about ownership. Owning your body. Owning your choices. Owning your story. You don't need to wait for fear, pain, or uncertainty to push you into action. You deserve proactive, powerful, pleasure-filled health decisions now.

You're not alone. You're part of a community of Black women rewriting the rules, breaking cycles of silence and shame and choosing knowledge, safety, and self-love. Whether you're 19, 24, or 32, there's space for your voice, your healing, and your joy.

Jasmine found clarity through education. Marie found peace through testing. Tamara found protection through PrEP. Summer found healing in community. Lanette found purpose after diagnosis. And you? You can find freedom in knowing your status, power in protecting your body, and courage in starting conversations that matter.

So don't wait. Book the appointment. Ask the question. Share the truth. Start the conversation.

When Black women are informed, supported, and seen, they become unstoppable. This is your invitation to step into your power, protect your health, and lead your sisters in doing the same. Because thriving Black women create thriving communities and that starts with you.

PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS EVERY BLACK WOMAN CAN TAKE TOWARDS SEXUAL HEALTH

- ◆ **Get Tested for STIs & HIV:** Schedule a visit to a healthcare provider for STI testing, especially if you're sexually active or have a new partner. Regular testing helps identify and treat infections early.
- ◆ **Use Barriers Consistently:** Commit to using condoms or other barrier methods consistently to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies.
- ◆ **Get on PrEP:** Whether it is one pill per day or a long term injectable, you have access to tools to ensure you don't acquire HIV through sexual contact. Speak to your primary care provider. Don't have one? Find a local PrEP provider at <https://preplocator.org>
- ◆ **Communicate with Your Partner:** Have an open conversation with your sexual partner(s) about boundaries, contraception, and sexual health status. Clear communication fosters healthy sexual relationships.
- ◆ **Educate Yourself About Consent:** Learn more about the importance of consent in sexual activities and practice it by making sure that all parties are willingly participating.
- ◆ **Visit a Healthcare Provider Regularly:** Schedule routine check-ups with a gynecologist, urologist, or other healthcare professional for sexual and reproductive health guidance, screenings, and preventive care.

- ◆ **Stay Informed about Sexual Health Resources:** Access credible resources to stay informed about sexual health, including topics on contraception, STI prevention, and sexual well-being.
- ◆ **Learn About Your Risk Factors:** Recognize the structural and social factors contributing to STI risks, such as partner concurrency or disparities in healthcare access, and take steps to mitigate them with informed decision-making.
- ◆ **Incorporate Self-Screening Tools:** Take advantage of at-home STI test kits available online or in pharmacies, which offer privacy and convenience for regular testing.
- ◆ **Seek Culturally Competent Care Providers:** Locate providers who specialize in serving Black women and are sensitive to the community's unique challenges and stigmas. Many local health departments or organizations, like the Black Women's Health Imperative, offer directories.
- ◆ **Join Community Programs:** Participate in sexual health education programs designed for Black women to learn about STIs, prevention strategies, and resources in your area.



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The health of Black women is deeply impacted by systemic inequalities like poverty and limited access to quality care. Our project aims to provide resources, improve data availability, and develop health programming to empower Black women.

HealthHIV, a premier national HIV nonprofit organization, and Howard University, a champion of Black women, are collaborating to conduct research, provide education, spark community engagement, and embrace the arts to create a path to empowerment. Our innovative project will improve the availability of data and develop creative health and wellbeing programming.

Empower offers a series of resources designed to inform, support, and uplift Black women and girls, providing them with the tools to advocate for their health and wellness. Through expert insights, engaging discussions, and community-driven storytelling, these initiatives directly address health challenges and promote empowerment.

[Learn more at HealthHIV.org/empower.](#)



HealthHIV is a national non-profit working with healthcare organizations, communities, and providers to improve HIV, HCV, STI, and LGBTQ healthcare and advance harm reduction and health equity through education and training, technical assistance and capacity building, advocacy, communications, and health services research and evaluation.

[Learn more at HealthHIV.org.](#)



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