

HIV LANGUAGE TIPS – terms to avoid and preferred terms.

Based on the UNAIDS terminology guidelines and the HIV Media Guide produced by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO).



Terms to be avoided	Preferred terms	Explanation
'HIV/AIDS'	'HIV' (alone) or 'AIDS' (alone) only if applicable	Avoid using 'HIV/AIDS'. Usually just using 'HIV' on its own is accurate in the context. Only use AIDS when specifically referring to AIDS-related illness and late stages of disease progression.
'AIDS virus' 'HIV virus'	'HIV'	There is No AIDS virus. The term 'virus' in the phrase 'HIV virus' is repetitive.
'People living with HIV/AIDS' (PLWHA)	'People living with HIV' (PLHIV);	Most people living with HIV do not have AIDS, and referring to people living with HIV includes people living with an AIDS-related illness.
'HIV-infected'	Person living with HIV	Avoid the term 'HIV-infected'. Use instead 'HIV-positive' if they know they are HIV-positive, or as 'having undiagnosed HIV infection' if they do not. Preference: Put the person first; i.e. PLHIV
Full-blown AIDS	AIDS or AIDS-related illness	This term is overly dramatic and also implies that there is such a thing as a partial case of AIDS. A person has AIDS or they do not.
'Fighting AIDS' 'Fighting HIV'	'AIDS response', 'HIV response', 'response to AIDS', and 'response to HIV'	
Pandemic	Epidemic	Pandemic is a specific epidemiological term. Epidemic is more accurate in terms of the global nature of HIV, that includes specific terms at the national level such as generalised, concentrated, or low. Each of these types of epidemics have specific characteristics.
Commercial sex work	Sex work	You don't say commercial accountant! Preferred terms are sex work, commercial sex, or the sale of sexual services, transactional sex.
Prostitute or prostitution	'Sex worker' or 'sex work' or 'person who sells or solicits sex'	Unless referring to a specific movement that has reclaimed the word 'prostitute', preferred terms such as sex work, sex worker, transactional sex, or the sale of sexual services.
'Intravenous drug user' or 'injecting drug user' or 'drug addict' or 'injection drug user'	Person who uses drugs or person who injects drugs	Drugs are injected subcutaneously, intramuscularly, or intravenously. Use person who injects drugs to place emphasis on the person first. A broader term that may apply in some situations is person who uses drugs. Always avoid a term like addict or abuser.
AIDS victim or AIDS sufferer or HIV victim	Person living with HIV	Use person living with HIV, and this includes people who may have AIDS-related illnesses. Always avoid a term like victim or sufferer.
Patient	Client	The term 'client' is preferred in most contexts as it is more empowering.
High-risk group	Affected communities or high-risk behaviour	Using the term HIV 'risk group' implies that membership of a particular group rather than behaviour, is the significant factor in HIV transmission. It is high-risk behaviours such as unprotected sex or unsafe injecting practices that can spread HIV, not 'belonging' to a high-risk group.

5 key tips and definitions:

- Be specific – and be accurate. Don't over generalise or sensationalise.
- HIV and AIDS are related, but different. HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is a virus that attacks vital cells in the body's immune system – specifically the CD4 cells responsible for fighting infection. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a medical term used to describe the condition caused by HIV. Someone is said to have AIDS when their immune system has stopped working due to HIV, and they have been diagnosed with a serious opportunistic infection or cancer.
- Put people first. When referring to any group, the best rule of thumb is to put the person first in the description rather than the illness or behaviour. For example person living with HIV (rather than HIV positive person) or person who uses drugs (rather than drug user). Sex worker remains a common term, but some people prefer to put the 'people first' and instead refer to people who sell or solicit sex.
- Stigma is different from discrimination. Discrimination is an action (which may result from stigma). Stigma is a process of devaluation or an attitude, and can be hard to identify or perceive.
- Key populations is a term that refers to specific communities most vulnerable to contracting HIV, and most commonly includes people living with HIV, men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, and people who use drugs. People affected by HIV is a term that includes all key populations, people caring for those living with HIV, and other groups vulnerable to contracting HIV because of social, cultural and economic inequalities such as women and young people.