

# Life with HIV: 'I feel like I've been cursed'

*A partner she trusted left her infected – and angry.*

The following is a frank look at how one woman contracted HIV. Some readers may find its content disturbing.

**By Pearlethia White**

I am mad as hell. Why? Because I am a 46-year-old black woman living with HIV, a condition that has turned my life upside down. This is my story.

In the winter of 2000, I met a man. We dated for about a year and a half before we became intimate. We didn't know anything about each other's previous sexual partners, and I wasn't going to take any chances since I knew that I could get a sexually transmitted disease like a 99-cent special.

He didn't want to wear a condom, but I insisted. "I have to protect myself," I said, telling him that without it we could not be together sexually. He finally agreed, and I put the condom on him myself that first time to ensure that I wouldn't catch anything.

One day, I found a condom on the side of the bed. He'd been slipping them off – nearly each time, I learned.

I was furious. I had been tricked and I felt like I had been violated. Why did you do it, I asked. "Don't worry," he assured me. "I'm clean. I don't have an STD or HIV."

It was over between us. "Get out right now," I shouted, adding lots of cuss words for good measure.

Three months passed and guess who showed up at my door? "Pearl," he said, "I have something to tell you. I got HIV."

"Stop playing," I said. He replied that he was serious, that he had been HIV-positive for 10 years.

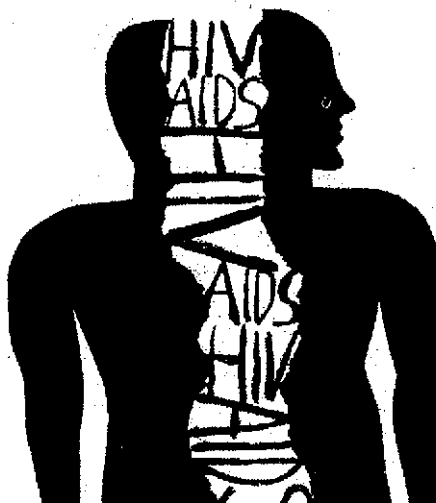
The first thing that came to my mind was that I was going to die. I'd never be able to see my grandbabies grow up.

Then the anger, the rage, overwhelmed me. "You killed me!" I shouted. "The dead woman walking."

I ran to the kitchen and pulled out the biggest knife I had. When he saw it, he ran out the door, my threats at his back.

When I went to the doctor's office to be tested for HIV, I was frightened, but I was even more angry that he'd been taking off the condoms. After waiting an agonizing week, I returned to my doctor for the diagnosis. She hugged me and said, "Pearlethia, you are HIV-positive."

At first, I couldn't say a word. Then started crying, saying over and over the this man had given me a death sentence. This slime bucket had killed me.



JOHN OVERMYER

The doctor explained that I could live a long life with HIV, but I wasn't hearing that. I wanted to kill myself rather than suffer.

The symptoms soon began: the night sweats, diarrhea, and weight loss. I suffered from depression so bad I wasn't eating or sleeping. I withdrew from the human race and constantly thought of suicide.

I'm a nurse's aide, you see, and I had cared for AIDS patients. I knew what could happen, and I wanted my life to end before I became bedridden.

I also wanted this man to go to jail because I was sure he was still spreading the virus around. I even had violent thoughts of paying a crackhead to do him in for me, since Pennsylvania's laws on knowingly passing on the virus didn't cover this instance. In the end, I decided to let God deal with this person who so willingly jeopardized the health of others.

For the remainder of my days, I will have to take pills on time, all the time. I will be quicker to catch illnesses and slower to heal. I feel like I've been cursed.

I am getting help, though. I am receiving services from BEBASHI (Blacks Helping Blacks About Sexual Health Issues), where I also attend weekly support groups to help me deal with my anger and gain some acceptance of this illness.

For me, it's one day at a time from here on.

Pearlethia White lives in Philadelphia.

For more information on services provided by BEBASHI call 215-769-3551.