

# **Student Essay on Living with AIDS**

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# Essay

Being a teenager is difficult enough, but having AIDS makes it even harder. If I weren't HIV-positive, I'd be taller. A lot of kids who were infected at birth are smaller than they should be. It's because when you're going through puberty, your body should be growing, but instead it's using the energy to fight the disease. In girls especially, there's something called lipodistrophy, a redistribution of fat in your body. I have muscular arms and legs, but a rounder torso and a tummy. There's no way to get rid of the fat. I hate wearing a bathing suit and shopping for pants.

Besides the physical aspects, there are all these emotions involved. Friendships can be hard. I'm sick so often that I miss out on a lot of the daily interactions at school. When I'm around my best friends, I tend to shield them. They'll say, "How are you"" and I'll say, "I'm fine," even if I'm not. I know it's hard to watch a friend be sick all the time.

The disease can be isolating, and being a teenager, you want to relate everything to your friends. You want to be able to say, "This happened to me today" and have your friends say, "I understand that happened to me too." I've finally been able to make friends like that, though community groups and at places like Camp Heartland, a summer camp in Minnesota for kids infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

But then there are romantic relationships. I mean, the disease is sexually transmitted, so there's that stigma and the different reactions that people have. I'm obviously not going to tell a guy I have AIDS right after I introduce myself. But I do have to tell him sooner or later. I've dated, but I'm not sexually active. I've been lucky that the guys I dated have understood what can and can't transmit the virus. Dating is hard for everyone, but it's definitely more difficult with HIV.