

A Letter to Every Warfighter: Mission Readiness and Your Sexual Health

A service member is diagnosed with HIV every two days. You don't have to be one of them.

Dear Warfighter,

I want to begin this letter by expressing my deepest gratitude for your unwavering commitment to serving your nation. You are the embodiment of strength, courage and sacrifice, and your dedication to protecting our freedom is nothing short of heroic.

Today, I want to address a topic that is of paramount importance, not only to your individual well-being, but also to the readiness and strength of our Armed Forces: HIV prevention. In the heat of battle and amidst your many sacrifices, your health is paramount. It's my hope that this letter serves as a reminder of the importance of safeguarding your health, particularly when it comes to HIV prevention.

Understanding the Importance

In the military, you're not just Warfighters; you're the backbone of our national defense. Your physical and mental fitness are crucial, not only for your own well-being, but for the safety and security of our nation. HIV prevention plays a vital role in maintaining mission readiness.

Challenges in the Military

I recognize that your service comes with unique challenges. Deployments, long separations from loved ones and the stress of military life can all take their toll. Throughout these challenges, it's essential to prioritize your sexual health.

HIV Education and Awareness

Knowledge is power, and in this case, it can be a lifesaver. HIV is caused by a virus that requires lifelong medication. Understanding how HIV is transmitted and learning methods to prevent it are the first steps towards protecting yourself and your fellow service members.

Steps to HIV Prevention

Here are some important steps you can take:

- **Abstain:** It's ok to say no. People can show affection without sex.
- **Be Faithful:** Two HIV-free partners who are monogamous cannot get HIV through sex.
- **Condoms and Safe Sex Practices:** Condoms are your friends. They are highly effective in preventing the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Incorporating condoms into your sexual health practices is a responsible and caring choice. Use condoms consistently and correctly. They are readily available, and practicing safe sex is a responsible choice.
- **Decrease the Number of Partners:** Many people who have HIV don't know it and don't look sick. Having sex with fewer people reduces the chance of contact with the virus.
- **Evaluate Risky Situations:** Avoid risky situations like alcohol and sex, such as receptive anal sex and partners who may have multiple other sexual partners.



- **HIV PrEP Awareness:** PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a game-changer in HIV prevention. It's a daily medication that can greatly reduce your risk of contracting HIV, especially if you're in a high-risk category. Talk to your healthcare provider about whether PrEP is right for you.
- **Testing:** Test for HIV at least once every year if you think you are at high risk. Testing will not protect you from getting infected with HIV but will enable you to get treatment sooner and help you protect others.
- **Support Networks:** Seek support from within the military community and from healthcare professionals. There's strength in unity, and you are not alone in this journey.

Breaking Stigma

The stigma surrounding HIV can be a barrier to prevention and care. I urge you to promote an environment of mutual trust and understanding within your ranks. Supporting one another without prejudice is a testament to the camaraderie that defines our military.

Support from Leadership

Leadership, at all levels, plays a crucial role in promoting HIV prevention, testing and education. Advocate for comprehensive programs that ensure the health and well-being of every service member.

Resources for Service Members

Remember that you have access to a range of resources within the military, including healthcare services and confidential counseling. Don't hesitate to reach out for support and information.



Empowerment and Resilience

In the face of adversity, you have always shown remarkable resilience. Take control of your sexual health, embrace the knowledge and resources available to you and continue to protect not only our nation, but also yourselves and your loved ones.

In closing, I want to reiterate my profound appreciation for your service. You are our heroes, and your health matters deeply. By taking proactive steps in HIV prevention, you can continue to stand strong in defense of our great nation.



Respectfully,

Dr. Francis Obuseh
Reproductive and Sexual Health Lead
Defense Centers for Public Health – Portsmouth
Defense Health Agency