

Living with HIV

To mark World Aids Day, Headliners reporters from Foyle find out the human story behind HIV.

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"Receiving dental treatment is almost impossible. At the moment I use the dental school at the Royal but when you go in there you're made to feel like an alien because the entire room is covered in plastic: The dentist is in a space suit, the dental nurses are in a space suit, you're given visors and glasses and masks and a cloak is put over you. It is the most degrading experience, just to go and have your teeth looked at."

Belfast native Jay is 35. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1999, having at first been given an AIDS diagnosis.

"I believe that I contracted HIV perhaps four or five years before that but I didn't know until I became very ill and was then diagnosed. It took me perhaps a year to regain my strength. I was diagnosed through having pneumonia and was given 24 hours to live and was very ill.

"I spent a year in hospital and it's took me four or five years to regain my strength and lead a somewhat normal life. I'm not working, I don't have the physical ability to be able to be out to work but I try and lead a healthy, happy life."

Although some of his friends found it difficult to come to terms with, his family were very supportive towards Jay from the moment they found out.

"They have been incredible from they day I was diagnosed; they have been a tower of strength. My friends are a lifeline to me as well, they are very supportive.

"Other people that I was friendly with turned their back on me because they just couldn't understand or didn't want to believe that it could happen, especially to me. To some of them I was their best friend and it was very difficult for them."

As Jay explains he has not only had to fight a physical battle, but a psychological one too.

"I get quite angry sometimes. I think it's through impatience, because in my mind I know that I want to do A, B and C, but my body won't physically let me and that's difficult. I've had to learn myself to keep just calm and stress free because those things just flare up illness and make you feel worse."

Jay is concerned that a lot of young people now believe HIV is not a huge issue, believing that drugs can easily control the virus.

He takes 13 tablets over the course of the day at very strict times, and they can have terrible side effects on the body. "Because those drugs are so toxic on your body, they have given me internal abscesses and I've had 12 different surgeries over the past 2 years to try and remove that. And then I've had other cancers inside the body, all caused by HIV drugs."

On some occasions this strict routine of daily self medicating has become too much for Jay.

"I mean I've gone through a couple of occasions where taking the drugs has become such a chore I just threw them all in the bin one day and said I'm not taking these anymore.

"I'm so sick and tired of living my life around scheduling drugs but I do realise now that it's the drugs that are keeping me alive. They're doing a lot of damage to your body but they're keeping you alive and that's the most important thing!"

There are now over 500 reported cases of people living with HIV in Northern Ireland. Jay feels awareness of HIV & AIDS needs to be boosted.

"A lot people don't believe that it actually exists here. I have spoken to so many people over the years who just say, 'Well I don't know anybody here who is living with HIV, I've never met anybody and sure there's only a handful, maybe only 40 or 50 people'.

"There is also so many people here with it that actually don't realise that they have it. I believe there's going to be an explosion in the next couple of years of diagnoses because people have just been so ignorant to it."

About this article

This story was written by David McReynolds, Aoife White, Sharmin Rahman and Sharon McLaughlin from our Foyle newsroom. It was published on the [Reach for the Sky](#) website.

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