

Women and HIV:

Living healthy,
living strong

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Introduction

Living with HIV: What you need to know

Have you just found out you are HIV positive? Or did you already know you had HIV, but you never sought treatment? Maybe you have taken medication in the past or are currently taking medication to treat your HIV but now want to take better care of yourself. Like other women with HIV, it is possible you may have feelings of guilt, fear, or anger. We understand and want to give you information that will help you deal with your feelings as well as your health.

This booklet can help. It was written especially for women with HIV and covers what you need to know about HIV, so you can live your life fully.

Since men and women are different, the approach to your HIV care should be different too. You will find tips for getting the care and support you need to stay as healthy as possible for yourself and for those who depend on you.

Other important topics in this booklet just for women include:

- ◆ Pregnancy and childbirth
- ◆ Breast-feeding
- ◆ Caring for children

It also discusses HIV basics, including how HIV affects your body and what types of treatments are available to treat HIV.

Take the opportunity now to learn as much about HIV as you can. The effort will help you get the care and support you deserve.



Learning About HIV

HIV basics

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. The 3 most common ways people get HIV are by¹:

- ◆ Having unprotected sex with someone infected with HIV
- ◆ Sharing needles with someone infected with HIV
- ◆ Passing HIV to a child during pregnancy, at birth, or through breast-feeding

HIV is a serious condition that can affect your health and create challenges.^{1,2} So, it is very important that you get and take proper care. A positive attitude is helpful when dealing with HIV.

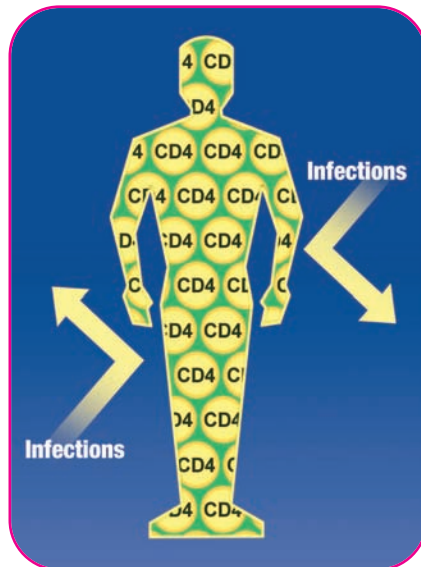
This brochure will help you find the best ways to manage your HIV.

How HIV affects your body

To stay healthy, your immune system helps your body fight off infections.¹ To protect your body, your immune system fights infections by using cells called **CD4 cells**.²

If you have HIV, you can lose CD4 cells because HIV attacks these cells. CD4 cells are also sometimes called T cells.²

When your body loses too many CD4 cells, your immune system is weakened. When this happens, your body has a very hard time fighting off illnesses.²



The difference between HIV and AIDS

HIV is the cause of **AIDS** (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). HIV infection becomes AIDS when a person's immune system has only a certain number of CD4 cells left (fewer than 200) or when a person gets an illness that is specifically related to AIDS. By this point, the body has become so weakened that it can no longer fight infections effectively.^{1,2} As a result, people with AIDS get illnesses that healthy people easily fight off.²

AIDS makes it very hard for a person to perform normal daily activities.² For example, a woman with AIDS may be so weak that she is unable to:

- ◆ Care for children and other family members
- ◆ Go to work
- ◆ Fulfill other responsibilities

Once your CD4 cell count drops below 200 or you get an AIDS-related illness, you will be diagnosed with AIDS.² This is why it is so important to keep your CD4 cell count from dropping. A high cell count will help your body remain strong and able to fight infections, and will help keep HIV infection from turning into AIDS for as long as possible.

Healthy living and regular visits to the healthcare professional can help make this possible. When you have HIV, belief in yourself and your healthcare professional is very important.

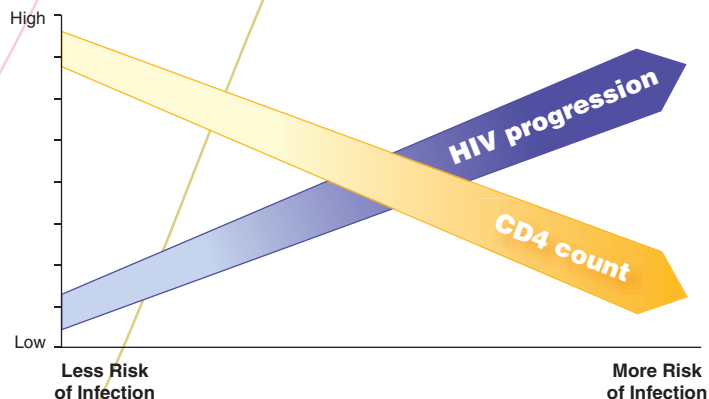
Managing your numbers

When you meet with your healthcare professional, he or she will do a blood test to determine how much HIV is in your body. This test is called a **viral load test**.²

Your healthcare professional will also measure the number of CD4 cells in a small amount of your blood. This is called a **CD4 cell count**, and it is an indication of how strong or weak your immune system is.^{2,3}

As HIV progresses, it causes the^{2,3}:

- ◆ Amount of HIV in the body (viral load) to go up and
- ◆ Number of CD4 cells to go down



It is very important for people with HIV to get regular blood tests to monitor how fast or slow HIV is progressing. Your healthcare professional will also use these blood tests to determine the right time to start HIV treatment and to monitor how well the HIV medications are working.²

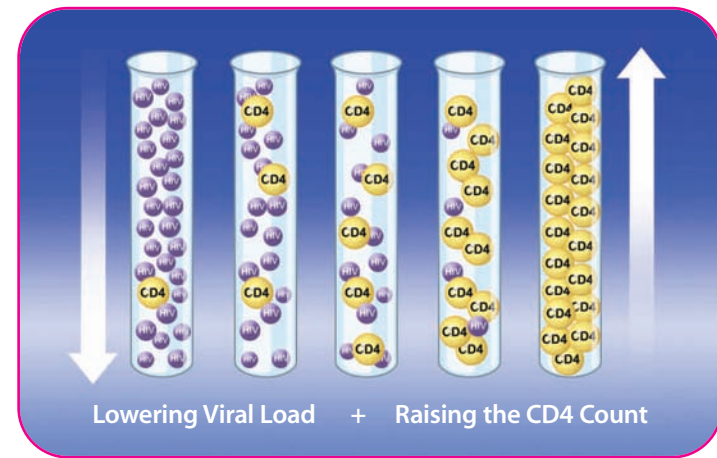
He or she will determine how often you will have your viral load and CD4 cell count checked.

Be sure to work with your healthcare professional and the rest of your treatment team. Share your daily routine and any challenges you may encounter along the way (eg, transportation) as your treatment team may assist you with these needs. Together, you can find a way to get any support you may need so that you don't have to miss any appointments for these tests.

HIV treatment goals for success

There are 2 important goals of HIV treatment^{2,3}:

- ◆ To get and keep your viral load as low as possible, and
- ◆ To get and keep your CD4 cell count as high as possible



With treatment, you and your healthcare professional will work together to get your viral load to be **undetectable**. This means that the amount of HIV in the blood is too low to be seen on a viral load test. Getting viral loads down to undetectable levels is important because that will keep HIV from progressing to AIDS for a longer period of time.²

But remember, even if your viral load is undetectable, it does not mean you are cured. You can still pass HIV to others.^{1,2}

Talk about your viral load and CD4 cell count numbers with your healthcare professional. Don't be afraid to ask what your numbers mean for you. Your healthcare professional will want you to be an involved and informed member of your treatment team.

Finding the Right Treatment for HIV

The right time to start treatment

At some point, you will need to take medications to help fight HIV. Your healthcare professional will say when this time has arrived and will help find the right treatment for you. He or she will make this decision depending on your²:

- ◆ Blood test results
- ◆ Symptoms
- ◆ Health status
- ◆ Willingness to start treatment

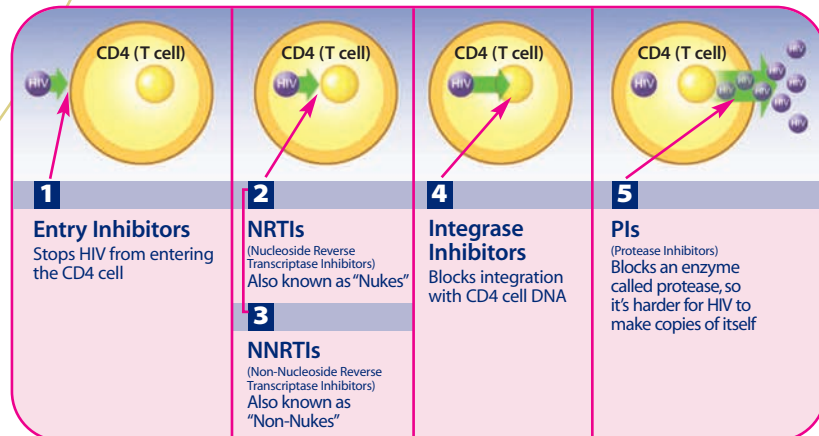
HIV meds can make a big difference in how you feel. A treatment that is right for you will be one that helps keep your HIV from progressing and does not cause too many side effects.^{2,3}

Different types of treatment

There are many types of HIV meds available. Each type works in a different way to prevent HIV from making copies of itself, which is how HIV spreads and attacks more and more CD4 cells.²

Your healthcare professional will suggest a combination of 3 or more different types of HIV meds that must be taken every day.²

Do your best not to miss any appointments, so that your healthcare professional can monitor your progress and make any treatment changes that may be needed.

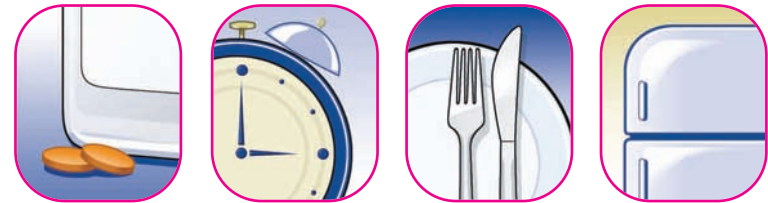


Learning to live with your HIV treatment

A woman on HIV treatment should expect HIV meds to help get and keep her viral load down and her CD4 cell count up.³ This will prevent HIV from progressing to AIDS for as long as possible.²

In order to keep your commitment to staying strong and healthy, it is very important to follow the instructions for taking HIV meds. That means you must understand²:

- ◆ How many tablets or capsules to take each day
- ◆ What times each day to take the meds
- ◆ Whether the meds need to be taken with or without food
- ◆ Whether the meds should be refrigerated



If you have questions about how to take the meds, ask your healthcare professional or the pharmacist.

Dealing with side effects that may occur

Some people experience side effects with HIV treatment and others do not. Some side effects may include rash, headache, diarrhea, nausea, or stomach pain. Side effects can be temporary and happen in the first days or weeks of starting HIV medication, or when changing to a different one, or they can last longer. Tell your healthcare professional about anything that is bothering you. He or she will determine if you need to make a change in your treatment.^{2,4,5}

Living With HIV: Staying Strong During Pregnancy, Breast-feeding, and Child Care

Women face different challenges than men

Because your body is different from a man's, you face different challenges in dealing with HIV. For example, pregnancy and childbirth can present special challenges for you.⁶ Also, if you are caring for young children, you may need extra support as you deal with HIV.

Pregnancy and HIV

Whether or not to have a baby is a big decision, especially when you have HIV. If you do not wish to become pregnant, be sure to use birth control. Use a condom even if you are using other birth control methods such as "the pill." Condoms help prevent the spread of HIV to others, while birth control pills do not.⁷ Also, some HIV medicines make birth control pills less effective at preventing pregnancy.⁸

If you *do* wish to have children, you should talk with your healthcare professional as soon as possible. If you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, there are some very important things to think about.

Research has shown that pregnancy will not make HIV progress any faster if you are generally in good health.⁹ However, there is a risk that HIV could be passed on to your baby.¹⁰

As a pregnant woman with HIV, you should see an obstetrician (a doctor who delivers babies) who has experience treating women with HIV.⁸ You want to get the best care possible because that is what you and your baby deserve.

Pregnancy and HIV medications

If you are pregnant, you could pass HIV to your baby at any time during the course of your pregnancy or at the time of birth. It is recommended that you take anti-HIV medications to prevent your baby from becoming infected and also for your own health. You should always follow your healthcare professional's instructions about which HIV meds are appropriate for you.⁶

The treatments you should take for HIV will depend mostly on whether⁶:

- ◆ You yourself need treatment to stay healthy
 - If you are already receiving HIV medication, your doctor will determine if you should continue your current regimen throughout the course of your pregnancy
 - If you are new to HIV treatment, medication should be started as soon as possible in the first trimester
- ◆ Treatment is only needed to keep you from passing HIV to your baby
 - Medication may be started after the first trimester
 - You should discuss when to start treatment with your doctor



Caring for children when you have HIV

If you are like many women, you have others who depend on you. In fact, many women with HIV take care of at least 1 child under the age of 18.¹¹



Because of the demands of taking care of children, you may find you often cannot make doctor's appointments or take your meds as prescribed.⁶ This is understandable. You don't want to let others down, but the best way to take care of others is to also take care of yourself.

That is why it is very important to find the support you need to deal with your HIV. For example, you may want to²:

- ◆ Find an HIV support group
- ◆ Go to a medical office, clinic, or community group, such as the AIDS Service Organization (ASO) or a community-based organization (CBO), that may provide sources for child care assistance
- ◆ Reach out to members of your treatment team, such as a social worker or case manager, who can help you find the services you need
- ◆ Try to find someone you trust and who you feel comfortable sharing your diagnosis with. A supportive circle of close family members and friends can be helpful in the course of your treatment

While HIV can be transmitted to your baby during the course of your pregnancy, you are most likely to pass HIV along during labor or delivery after your "water" breaks. Your doctor may recommend a *C-section* before your due date to lower the risk of passing HIV to your baby, especially if⁶:

- ◆ Your viral load is high
- ◆ You were not receiving adequate HIV treatment
- ◆ You were not receiving adequate healthcare throughout your pregnancy

There are some risks of surgery for women with HIV since your immune system may be weak, and you could get a serious infection. Your baby may also be put at risk during a *C-section* birth.⁶

Your healthcare professional will determine which treatments you should take and which delivery option is best for you and your baby. You will likely be given a medication called AZT to help prevent the HIV virus from being passed on to your baby in pregnancy, labor, or delivery. AZT may also help considerably in women who choose to give birth naturally.⁶

As always, be sure to discuss your pregnancy with your treatment team.

Can you breast-feed if you have HIV?

No, you should not breast-feed if you have HIV. Because breast milk can contain HIV, there is a chance of passing HIV on to your baby if you breast-feed. Use baby formula instead.⁶

Talk to your healthcare professional if you have questions about the best way to feed your baby. Also, ask your HIV counselor or caseworker if you have concerns about how you are going to feed your baby. They are there to help you. This valuable team of professionals can guide you in the proper nutrition for your growing baby.

Getting the Support You Need

Working with your healthcare professional

To get the care and support you need, you should see your healthcare professional regularly. This is the best way to fight HIV and the way to get the most out of your care.²

You should aim to be a partner in your medical care. This means that you should talk openly about your personal situation with your healthcare professional. This will help your healthcare professional decide the best way to help you.

For example, you should describe:

- ◆ How you are feeling
- ◆ If you have symptoms (eg, fatigue, fever and sweating, swollen lymph glands, diarrhea for more than a week, rapid weight loss)¹²

Tell your healthcare professional about all the medications you take or plan to take such as:

- ◆ Prescription meds
- ◆ Nonprescription meds (you can buy in the store)
- ◆ Vitamins
- ◆ Herbal supplements

If you are already taking HIV meds, you should tell your healthcare professional^{2,4}:

- ◆ How the medication is working for you
- ◆ If you are having any side effects (eg, rash, feeling tired or weak, nausea, stomach pain, diabetes, high cholesterol)

Other important ways to help in the success of your treatment include:

- ◆ Ask any questions you may have about HIV and HIV treatment
- ◆ Believe in yourself, your healthcare team, and your HIV meds

Support beyond your doctor's office or clinic

Women with HIV often experience guilt and denial. These feelings isolate women from the support they need. Get emotional support by asking your healthcare professional to recommend social and mental health services if needed.⁶

Don't forget to reach out to family, friends, and religious or social organizations in your neighborhood to find out if they have any services available for people with HIV.

By communicating openly and regularly, you, your family or friends, and your healthcare professional can make the best decisions about your HIV care. Remember, you are not alone.

