



THE FACTS

**TREATMENT:
IT'S YOUR CHOICE**

CAN HIV BE TREATED?

There are very effective treatments for HIV. Most people who take HIV treatment can live a long, healthy life.

Treatment prevents HIV from multiplying in the body and reduces damage to the immune system. HIV treatment lowers the amount of HIV in the blood (the viral load) and increases the number of CD4 cells, the immune cells that are attacked by HIV. Treatment improves your health and your life expectancy. It also prevents HIV from being passed on sexually.

HIV is a retrovirus. The treatment for HIV is called *Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART)*. Sometimes it is called ARV Therapy. There are five classes (types) of HIV drugs that stop different parts of the HIV life cycle. There are also booster drugs that increase the effect of some HIV drugs.

HIV treatment is usually a combination of three different classes of drugs. Some newer treatments are based on two classes of drugs. These may be combined in one pill.

People with an undetectable viral load, who are taking their medication as prescribed by their doctor, cannot pass HIV on to their sexual partners.

When should I start treatment?

Starting treatment as soon as possible after you are diagnosed will:

- Lower your viral load, the amount of HIV in your blood.
- Reduce the effects of HIV on your body
- Improve your health.
- Improve your life expectancy.

Once you start taking treatment it is important that you keep taking it. For this reason, it is important to think about whether you are ready to start taking treatment. If you are unsure, talk to your doctor. If you have been diagnosed with an AIDS defining illness, if you have a very low level of CD4 cells or if you are pregnant you should start treatment immediately. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

What about side effects?

HIV treatment can have side effects. HIV treatments have greatly improved and many have only minor side effects. However, the side effects of some medications can cause problems. Some side effects only last for the first few days or weeks of treatment. Others can appear over time. Talk to your doctor about what side effects to expect when you start treatment.

Your doctor may do tests to monitor side effects of your medication.

If you are having trouble with side effects then tell your doctor. You may need to change your medication or they may give you medication to help with your side effects.

Will my HIV treatment interact with my other medications?

A drug interaction is a reaction between two or more medications. It can make the drug less effective, increase the action of the drug or cause side effects. Some HIV treatments interact with other medications. Your doctor will ask you about other medications, recreational drugs and supplements you are taking to help them choose an HIV treatment that won't cause a drug interaction. It is important that you tell them what you are taking so they can prescribe the best treatment for you.

How long do I need to take treatment?

There is no cure for HIV. Once you start taking treatment you will need to keep taking treatment for the rest of your life. This means taking medication every day. Research is being done on implants and injectable HIV treatments that may last weeks, months or longer.

Taking my treatment

It is important to take your medication as prescribed by your doctor. Missing doses or stopping treatment can weaken your immune system, affecting your health. It can also cause drug resistance and your treatment may stop working. If you do develop resistance, you will need to change medication, possibly to a medication that is not as effective as or that has more side effects than the treatment you were taking. If you forget to take your HIV treatment at your usual time, take it when you remember then go back to your regular dosing time. If you realise when you are about to take the next dose, do not take a double dose.

TIPS TO HELP WITH TAKING YOUR TREATMENT

- Use a pill box with divided containers. You will know if you have taken your medication by looking at the box.
- Make taking your treatment a part of your daily routine, like cleaning your teeth.
- Set an alarm(s) on your phone to help you remember to take your medication
- Get help from you HIV doctor, nurse or a Living Positive Victoria Peer Navigator if you regularly miss taking your treatment
- Try to keep a small reserve of your HIV treatments so you don't run out of medications. Stock up early, especially if you are travelling or going on holidays
- Arrange for your pharmacy to send SMS reminders for picking up your medications.
- Use apps like MyLife+ to help you track your medication and blood tests.
- Get help for issues that make it hard to take your medication: mental health, alcohol, drug, or financial problems.

Can I take HIV treatment if I am pregnant?

Many HIV treatments are safe to take while you are pregnant. They not only keep you healthy but can protect your baby from HIV. But some treatments are not suitable to take while you are pregnant. If you are pregnant or if you are planning to become pregnant it is important to talk to your doctor about the best treatment to take.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

HIV Tests and Treatments

An Australian website with accurate, up to date and easy to understand information about managing and treating HIV.

www.hivtnt.org.au

Treat HIV Now

A website about HIV treatments aimed at gay men and men who have sex with men. **www.treathivnow.org.au**

HIV Drug Interactions

A searchable website that lets you check the interactions between HIV treatments and other drugs, including recreational drugs. **www.hiv-druginteractions.org**

MyLife+

An app that helps you track you HIV health, treatments, blood tests and wellbeing. **www.mylifeplus.com.au**

Next Steps

A guide for people newly diagnosed with HIV. It is available as a booklet from your HIV clinic or HIV community organisation or it can be downloaded from **www.hivnextsteps.org.au**

Content is adapted with permission from Queensland Positive People's Peer Navigation Program.