

#Icanlive



I CAN LIVE

You made a smart decision to get tested for HIV. This fact sheet will help you understand your test results and your options.

What happens after I have tested positive for HIV?

After a positive test, you will talk with a nurse and perhaps a counselor to learn more about HIV and the medications available to treat it. The next step is to start taking antiretroviral medicine (ARVs) for treatment.

- You may feel very shocked and upset – this is normal. If you need some time to absorb this news, let the nurse know. But don't wait to start treatment – the sooner you start treatment, the sooner you control your HIV and get back to living the life you want.
- HIV treatment today is very different than it was even 5 years ago. Most people take just one pill a day and have few or no side effects. People with HIV who take treatment live long, healthy lives – as long as people who don't have HIV. Plus, if you take your treatment as prescribed, within a few months the amount of virus in your body will be so low, you won't be able to pass it on through sex.
- There is still no cure for HIV, so you have to take treatment to protect your health and prevent new infections. But this treatment is easy, safe and free.

I feel so upset. How do I cope after a positive HIV test result?

Everyone reacts differently when they find out they have HIV, but common feelings include shock, anger, fear, or sadness. You may have questions about how you got the virus, and questions about what will happen to you.

- All these emotions and questions are normal and learning more about HIV will help to answer your questions.
- The good news is that HIV treatment is very effective, easy to use, safe and free. Your life with HIV doesn't need to be that different than your life before HIV, if you start and stay on treatment.
- Part of what makes HIV difficult is the stigma and wrong information about the virus in our communities. It may feel to you like having HIV is the end of your life. These fears are understandable, but every day we see people with HIV living normal lives, falling in love, getting married, graduating from university, starting businesses and having babies. There is NOTHING you cannot do as long as you start and stay on treatment.
- You are not alone and having someone to talk to about your feelings can help. We can connect you with other people who have been in your shoes and are now doing well on HIV treatment. These are people who can provide you with support, advice and encouragement.
- Talking to a trusted friend or family member can also help you process your feelings.

When should I start treatment?

We encourage you to start your treatment today, right now.

- As soon as you start taking ARVs, your body's ability to fight the virus grows. Every day you take your medication, the amount of HIV in your body goes down. After just a few months, you will reach a state called "viral

suppression." This means that there is not enough virus in your body to infect a sexual partner.

- Eventually, you will reach the point when the amount of virus is so low that laboratory tests cannot detect HIV in your blood. We call this "undetectable" and it means your HIV is fully controlled. You are not cured (there is no cure for HIV), but as long as you continue to take your ARVs as prescribed, HIV cannot make you sick and you cannot infect anyone else through sex.

Shouldn't I wait until I am sick to take HIV treatment?

- You may remember a time when people didn't start HIV treatment until they were sick. This is no longer recommended. We now know that starting treatment as soon as you know you are positive is best for your health, and for preventing new HIV infections. HIV medication is much simpler – usually just one pill per day – with few or no side effects. The sooner you start, the better.
- You will need to take your HIV medication everyday, at the same time and when you do this, YOU are in control – HIV doesn't control you.

ARVs do not cure HIV, but they help your own immune system to stop the virus from multiplying in your body. This reduces the amount of the virus in the blood first to the point of "viral suppression" and eventually to very low levels known as "undetectable." The goal is for every person living with HIV to reach this "undetectable" status for the best possible health.

It's not hard to reach this "undetectable" state – you just have to take your ARVs every day, as prescribed (we like you to take them at the same time every day). *But you will not stay undetectable unless you continue to take your medication every day.*

- If you stop taking your medication, the virus will start to multiply again, attacking your body and potentially spreading to others through sex. Remember, the virus can be multiplying in your body without you feeling sick. Feeling well is not a sign that you are cured or that you don't need

treatment. To truly be well, you must take your medication every day without fail.

What is viral load?

Viral load is the amount of HIV in your body, measured in copies per milliliter of blood. When people have more than 1,000 copies per milliliter of blood, they become sick and can transmit the virus. The first goal of treatment is to get your viral load to less than 1,000 copies per milliliter.

Viral load is measured with a blood test. You will get your first viral load test after you have been on treatment for 6 months. Most people are virally suppressed by the time they get this test, and many are undetectable. Be sure to follow up with your provider to learn your test results and celebrate if you are virally suppressed or undetectable. This is an exciting moment!

If your viral load test shows that you are not yet virally suppressed, don't worry. Your provider will work with you to figure

out what is slowing down your progress and develop a plan to bring it down. You must follow this plan closely to protect yourself, your sexual partner and to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to your baby if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Once you are virally suppressed, you will start a regular schedule of viral load tests, with your second test 6 months after your first, and then yearly thereafter or as indicated by your health service provider.

Can I safely have sex without a condom once my viral load is suppressed?

The World Health Organization has declared that there is no evidence of HIV being transmitted through sex when a person living with HIV is virally suppressed. Once you have a viral load test that shows you are virally suppressed, you don't need to use condoms for HIV prevention, as long as you continue to take your ARVs *every day without fail*. However, ARVs don't protect against pregnancy or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, herpes or gonorrhea, so we recommend you continue to use condoms when you're having sex with new or risky partners.

Can I breastfeed my baby if I'm virally suppressed?

Yes, you can! In fact, the World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for all infants for the first 6 months and continued breastfeeding up to 24 months and beyond regardless of HIV and viral load status.

- However, being virally suppressed or having an undetectable viral load is even better. When your HIV is under control, your risk of transmitting to your baby through breastfeeding is greatly reduced, plus you are healthier and better able to care for your baby.

Does everyone on HIV treatment become virally undetectable?

- Not everyone taking ARVs for HIV treatment is undetectable. The only way to know if your HIV is suppressed or undetectable is by getting a viral load test. Visit your nearest health centre and ask about viral load testing.
- The most common reason people living with HIV are not virally suppressed is that they do not take their ARVs every day. Skipping doses or going on and off treatment will prevent you from controlling your HIV and can lead to medication resistance, when your ARVs no longer work as prescribed. If you become resistant to the ARVs you are prescribed, you may have to switch to a new medication regimen with more pills and potential side effects. *This is why we want you to take your ARVs every day, as prescribed!*

- Some people become virally suppressed but don't reach undetectable, even though they take their ARVs every day. This can occur for lots of reasons, but it is not a cause for worry. Your provider may ask you to come to the clinic a little more often to make sure you are staying healthy.