



Antiretroviral therapy for people living with HIV in Ireland

Effective HIV treatment
keeps you healthy and stops
transmission to others



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HSE Position on antiretroviral therapy

In July 2017, the HSE adopted the position that all people living with HIV attending HIV services in Ireland are offered antiretroviral therapy and informed of the benefits of antiretroviral therapy in improving their personal health and reducing HIV infectiousness.

What is HIV treatment?

HIV treatment is also known as antiretroviral therapy (ART).

Treatment with ART is often called combination therapy because people usually take more than one drug at the same time, often combined into one tablet.

Current HIV treatment is not a cure for HIV. It can keep HIV under control but it does not eliminate HIV. ART works by stopping the virus from reproducing in your body. It can reduce the amount of the virus (your viral load) to very low (undetectable) levels.

If you are taking ART regularly and have an undetectable viral load, this lets your immune system stay strong, and if it has been damaged by the virus, can allow it to recover. Enormous progress has been made in the treatment of people living with HIV since the mid 1990's such that, for many, life expectancy is similar to that of the general population.

If you are taking ART correctly, achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load, there is effectively no risk of passing HIV on to sexual partners. This is also known as "U=U", undetectable equals untransmittable.

Why is antiretroviral therapy beneficial?

ART is beneficial from an individual perspective because it keeps your immune system strong, prevents illness and improves life expectancy.

ART is also beneficial from a population perspective because it prevents HIV being passed on to others. This is known as Treatment as Prevention (TasP).

For many people living with HIV, the relief from anxiety about passing on HIV is also a very important benefit of HIV treatment.

What is the evidence?

Many studies have found that people living with HIV have a much lower risk of developing an AIDS-defining illness if they start taking ART as early as possible, preferably when their CD4 cell count is above 500.

With successful treatment, people living with HIV have a life expectancy similar to that of the general population.

For those who start on ART with a low CD4 cell count, their life expectancy improves significantly if they have a good CD4 cell count response (if they respond well to treatment) and achieve an undetectable viral load.

In addition to the significant individual benefits associated with ART for people living with HIV, ART is also central to HIV prevention.

Effective HIV treatment (when people living with HIV are on ART and have an undetectable viral load) has been shown in many clinical trials and real world studies, to prevent sexual transmission of HIV.

These studies provide robust evidence in support of the statement “U=U”, undetectable equals untransmittable.

Effective ART in pregnancy has similarly been shown to prevent transmission of HIV to babies.

When to start HIV treatment

Worldwide it is now recommended that everyone diagnosed with HIV starts treatment as soon as possible, regardless of their immune status (CD4 count).

In Ireland, the HSE Position on Antiretroviral Therapy for all People Living with HIV recommends that everyone with HIV is informed of the benefits of antiretroviral therapy and should start treatment as soon as possible.

Being ready to start treatment

It is normal to have questions or feel worried about starting HIV treatment. You should discuss with your HIV doctor or nurse any concerns that you may have about starting treatment.

There are a number of factors you might want to consider:

- > **Why should I start treatment now?**
- > **What would happen to me if I don't start treatment now?**
- > **How will I remember to take medication every day?**
- > **Are there other factors in your life that affect your ability to start taking HIV treatment?**

In addition to talking to your HIV doctor and nurse, you may find it helpful to talk to someone who has experience of taking HIV treatment.

Your clinic can put you in touch with local community organisations and peer support groups.

How quickly will my viral load become undetectable?

Once treatment is started, people usually become undetectable within six months. During that time you may still be infectious, meaning you could pass HIV on to someone else.

Using condoms correctly and all the time reduces the risk of passing on HIV during that time. If you had a condom accident during that time, your partner might need post exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is another way of preventing HIV and your partner might benefit from PrEP before your viral load is undetectable.

It is always a good idea to know your viral load result when you are on HIV treatment. You should discuss your results and whether or not your partner would benefit from PEP or PrEP with your HIV doctor or nurse.

Condom use when my viral load is undetectable

Before you consider stopping using condoms with a HIV-negative partner, it is a good idea to talk to your HIV doctor or nurse to make sure your viral load is undetectable.

Discussing what an undetectable viral load means with HIV-negative partners may help reduce their anxiety about HIV transmission. This information may be new to people who do not have HIV so they may need some time to inform themselves and fully understand what it means.

It is important to remember that if you have sex without a condom, you may pick up other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pass these on. Sex without a condom can also result in pregnancy if you are not using another form of contraception.

HSE position on antiretroviral therapy for all people living with HIV

Available on:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/hivandaids/hivtreatmentandprep/>

and

<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sexually-transmitted-infections/information-on-hiv/>

Community organisations and peer support groups

Positive Now: all-Ireland network of people living with HIV

<https://www.hivireland.ie/living-with-hiv/positivenow/>

HIV Ireland

<https://www.hivireland.ie/what-we-do/support-and-advocacy/>

Where can I get more information about antiretroviral therapy?

Your HIV doctor and nurse

Aidsmap

<https://www.aidsmap.com/topic/hiv-treatment>

Terrence Higgins Trust

<https://www.tht.org.uk/hiv-and-sexual-health/living-well-hiv>

Be in the KNOW

<https://www.beintheknow.org/living-with-hiv>

HIV i-Base

<http://i-base.info/hiv-positive/>

You can order more copies of this booklet free of charge from

www.healthpromotion.ie

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