

Treatments: The basics

Women and HIV: A series of factsheets for women about HIV



Testing for HIV



Recently Diagnosed



Looking after yourself



Pregnancy and me



NSW Services & Websites

What treatments are available?

There are medications that work well to treat HIV. The standard treatment is called Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and consists of three or more HIV medications. You may also see it called ARV (Antiretrovirals), HAART (Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy) or cART (Combination Antiretroviral Therapy).

These drugs do not cure HIV but they work by reducing the amount of HIV virus produced in the body. This slows down the damage to your immune system and helps prevent illness.

Monitoring your health

Whether you are on treatments or not, it is important that you see your doctor and have blood tests regularly - usually every three months.

The doctor will monitor how HIV is affecting your immune system with two tests:

Viral load: measures the amount of HIV virus in your blood. When the amount is very low, it is said to be 'undetectable'. This does not mean that the virus is gone from your body.

CD4 count: measures the CD4 cells which show how much damage is being done to your immune system by HIV.

The aim of treatments is to achieve an 'undetectable' viral load and to improve your CD4 count and your immune system.

Starting treatments

There are guidelines about when is a good time to start treatments, and your doctor will discuss the best time with you. Starting treatments is a big decision that you need to make together. That is why a good relationship with your doctor is so important.

Find out what your treatment options are and make sure you ask your doctor everything you want to know. You need to be informed and comfortable with the decisions made.

Adherence

For the treatments to work well, they need to be taken exactly as they are prescribed. This is called 'compliance' or 'adherence' and it means taking the drugs:

- At the right dose
- At the right times
- Following any advice about food and drink
- Without missing any tablets.

Make sure you understand clearly how you need to take the medications.

Side effects

You may experience side effects from the medications. Most of them will disappear after a few weeks. Talk to your doctor about how to deal with them. Do not stop taking your medication without talking to your doctor.

The most common short term side effects are:

- Diarrhoea
- Headaches
- Feeling sick/vomiting
- Pain in the belly
- Skin rashes
- Vivid or unusual dreams.

Some side effects may only last a short time, or only appear after you have been on treatment for a while. Your doctor will monitor for this.

Complementary therapies

Many women use complementary therapies to:

- Strengthen their immune system
- Help them cope with side effects
- Manage stress
- Improve energy.

They can include:

- Acupuncture
- Chinese medicine
- Homeopathy
- Massage
- Naturopathy.

It is very important that you tell your doctor about any complementary therapy you are using, as some of the herbs and substances can affect your HIV medication.

Are treatments expensive?

Most HIV treatments are subsidised by the government if you have a Medicare card. This means that you will only have to pay a small part of their cost.

If you have a Health Care or a Pension card you may be able to receive a further discount.

If you are worried about your finances talk to your doctor or support worker about it. There are services that may be able to help.

Services

Also see NSW Services and Websites factsheet

Treatments and Client Support Officer
ACON Ph: (02) 9699 8756

BGF (Bobby Goldsmith Foundation)
Practical and financial support
www.bgf.org.au Freecall: 1800 651 011

If you need an interpreter call 131 450

Further reading: follow the links or ask a support worker for a copy of these resources

Getting the best HIV care

<http://treataware.info/files/checklistguide.pdf>

Treat yourself right

http://www.afao.org.au/library_docs/resources/TYR_07.pdf

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