

TREAT EARLY

TEST MORE

STAY SAFE

UNDETECTABLE


WHAT ALL GAY MEN SHOULD KNOW

ENDING HIV

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IS IT TRUE...

that if a HIV positive partner is on treatment and has an undetectable viral load then there is almost no risk of HIV transmission in anal sex between gay men?



Yes. The PARTNER study shows that the chances of HIV transmission could be about 1% and in the worst case, as high as 4%, over a year depending on the nature of the sex between men. That is, the transmission risk could be as high as 4% if the HIV positive partner on HIV treatment with undetectable viral load is the top, and 1% if he's the bottom.

These are the initial results from the European PARTNER study presented in 2014. These encouraging numbers tell us that a lot has changed when it comes to treatment's effect on transmission risk. More results are due from this study in the next year or two.

Today, treatment is much easier to take, has a much lower risk of side effects and is much more effective at controlling HIV while keeping your immune system healthy. Treatment also greatly reduces the risk of developing health conditions associated with HIV.

The evidence for these effects is strengthening, but there is an overwhelming consensus that effective treatment not only is a key to reducing HIV transmission, it has the potential to transform the sexual relationships of people living with HIV and gay men more broadly.

Today more than ever, we know that we can end HIV by 2020 if we test more, treat early and continue to stay safe.

WHAT IS TREATMENT?

Treatment – or Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) – is the term we use for taking HIV medication. Unlike treatment of the past, today's treatments are far less toxic, assist in faster immune recovery, reduce the risk of developing HIV/AIDS related illnesses, are much easier to take – often just one pill a day – and greatly reduce the amount of HIV in your body in as early as 12 weeks.

Treatment improves your quality of life and general health and importantly it can reduce HIV transmission rates to almost zero.

WHY TREAT EARLY?

Evidence suggests that the most critical and effective time to begin treatment is as soon after your diagnosis as possible. The reasons are to improve your current and future health, but also because treatment greatly reduces your risk of transmitting HIV to your sexual partners. Regular HIV testing can help you become aware that you are HIV positive more quickly after infection, which is important because during the early stages of infection your viral load is very high, meaning, without treatment, the risk of passing on HIV is greatly increased. Your doctor can explain more.

The Australian Guidelines for HIV Treatment recommend considering going on ART at any stage of infection. To end HIV transmissions by 2020, we need to reduce the amount of virus in the community. So the overall aim is to have as many people considering and starting treatment as soon as possible.

WHAT DOES UNDETECTABLE MEAN?

When a HIV positive man is taking treatment (or ART) the amount of HIV in his body (known as his 'viral load') can effectively be reduced to a level that is 'undetectable'. It is important to note that undetectable does not mean cured or free of HIV. It simply means that the treatment has stopped the virus from replicating therefore making it far less likely to be passed on – or transmitted – during unprotected sex or higher risk play. It also means HIV is not multiplying so reducing harm to your body. Also, just like you can't tell if someone is HIV positive by looking at them, you can't tell if they have an undetectable viral load.

ENDING HIV

TREAT TO MAKE

HIV

UNDETECTABLE

Advances in treatment can dramatically
reduce HIV transmission risk.

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WHAT DOES THE TERM 'TREATMENT AS PREVENTION' MEAN?

Treatment as prevention is a term that basically refers to the impact that treatment has on viral load, and therefore HIV transmission risk. New research is showing that effective and regular HIV treatment can greatly reduce a HIV positive man's viral load to a very low level. In a nutshell, we can now say that effective HIV treatment is a form of prevention.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS TREATMENT IN REDUCING TRANSMISSION?

The initial findings from the PARTNER study in 2014 which looked at transmission risk for gay male couples where one was HIV positive (on treatment with undetectable viral load) show that the chances of HIV transmission could be about 1% and in the worst case, as high as 4% over a year depending on the nature of the sex between men. That is, the transmission risk could be as high as 4% if the HIV positive partner on HIV treatment with undetectable viral load is the top, and 1% if he's the bottom. More results are due from this study in the next year or two.

HOW LONG DO I NEED TO BE ON TREATMENT BEFORE MY VIRAL LOAD BECOMES UNDETECTABLE?

Over 90% of people on treatment will have an undetectable viral within 3 to 6 months of starting treatment, or even earlier for some. The effectiveness of treatment within that time period depends primarily on what your viral load was before you started ART, your T-cell count, general health and whether you've been on treatment previously.

DOES HAVING AN UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD MEAN THAT HIV ABSOLUTELY CANNOT BE TRANSMITTED?

Having an undetectable viral load dramatically reduces the odds of transmitting the virus, but it does not eliminate the risk completely. Also, keep in mind that other things like having an illness like the flu or a sexually transmitted infection (STI), or breaks in taking HIV meds can increase the viral load, increasing the risk of transmission.

I'VE MET A HOT GUY WHO IS HIV POSITIVE AND HAS AN UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD. DO WE NEED TO USE CONDOMS?

It's always important to openly discuss and negotiate using condoms with all sexual partners, including casual sex partners and random hook ups. While the viral load may be undetectable, there are other things to think about – especially STIs, whether you've been sick (e.g. the flu) or when the last viral load test was. Even though the new research is saying that having an undetectable viral load is good for health and greatly reduces the risk of passing on HIV, the key to good sexual health in your relationships remains trust, talking, and testing.

WHAT IF MY PARTNER AND I ARE BOTH POSITIVE AND UNDETECTABLE? CAN WE HAVE SEX WITHOUT CONDOMS?

If you are both positive with undetectable viral loads and want to stop using condoms, the research indicates that the risk of being infected with another strain of the virus is rare. Not using condoms can increase the transmission of STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and also Hepatitis C.

DOES HAVING AN STI IMPACT ON VIRAL LOAD?

Yes, becoming infected with an STI can cause an increase in viral load. For example, having syphilis can cause a big increase in the viral load, making it more likely for you to pass on the virus. That's why it is important to get regular sexual health check-ups and to get your viral load tested after you have had an infection.

IF MY VIRAL LOAD IS UNDETECTABLE, CAN I STOP TAKING MY MEDS?

No. Remaining on regular treatment is the key to staying undetectable and stopping the virus from replicating (making more copies of itself) inside your body. If you stop taking your meds, then HIV will resume its attack on your immune system, your health may deteriorate and your risk of passing on the virus dramatically increases.

ENDING HIV

D R O P
Y O U R
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Improve health, reduce transmission.
Make your viral load **undetectable**.

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ONCE THE VIRAL LOAD IS UNDETECTABLE, DOES IT STAY THAT WAY FOREVER?

No. Viral load can fluctuate – small “blips” are not uncommon. Regular viral load monitoring is recommended because even if you always remember to take your meds, other health issues (like the flu, STIs) can have an impact.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I HAVE MY VIRAL LOAD TESTED?

This depends on your circumstances. A basic guide is every three to four months. However, if you are solely relying on viral load as your HIV prevention method, you may want to consider testing more frequently. It is best to speak with your doctor about this in more detail, depending on your personal circumstances.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BECOME UNDETECTABLE IF I AM NOT ON HIV MEDS?

Only about 1 in 300 people with HIV keep their viral load undetectable without taking medications. These individuals are referred to by scientists and clinicians as “elite controllers”. Most people have to take HIV meds to control the virus and become undetectable.

IF I DO START TREATMENT AND CAN'T TOLERATE IT, CAN I STOP?

There are a range of alternative treatment options for you, so if you find this is the case, talk to your doctor as soon as possible before you make the decision to stop.

SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT THE TOXICITIES CAUSED BY TREATMENT?

Today's treatments are far less toxic than treatment of previous years. We now have evidence that show that the benefits of treatment outweigh concerns around toxicity, especially if your CD4 counts are low. You should feel free to raise this topic with your doctor.

CAN I STILL ENJOY A DRINK WHILE TAKING TREATMENT?

Yes you can. Unlike some medications, alcohol and HIV treatment do not impact negatively when taken together.

DO PARTY DRUGS REACT NEGATIVELY WITH TREATMENT?

'Recreational' or 'party drugs' can have a negative impact on your health, which may be counterproductive when trying to become undetectable. Further to that, the effect of party drugs and alcohol can sometimes mean you might forget to take your treatment. Missing taking your HIV meds can increase your viral load.

WHAT IF I CAN'T GET TO UNDETECTABLE?

In the case that you do not reach an undetectable level after six months on treatment, you might want to talk to your doctor about whether there might be a better treatment regimen for you. The most important thing is your own health and treatment is beneficial, however you may want to consult your doctor to discuss your treatment goals.

DO I STILL HAVE TO DISCLOSE MY HIV POSITIVE STATUS EVEN IF MY VIRAL LOAD IS UNDETECTABLE?

The NSW Public Health Act 2010 requires people living with HIV to take 'reasonable precautions' to avoid transmission in cases of non-disclosure. Traditionally, 'reasonable precautions' has been interpreted to mean using condoms. At present there has not been a case that has tested whether the courts will interpret having an undetectable viral load as taking reasonable precautions.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TREATMENT, PREP & PEP?

PrEP (Pre exposure prophylaxis) is a course of HIV medication that HIV negative men might choose to take to help reduce the risk of contracting HIV. In NSW PrEP is only available as part of clinical trials.

PEP (Post exposure prophylaxis) is a 4 weeks course of HIV medication which, if started within 72 hours after a risk event, is believed to significantly reduce the chances of becoming infected with HIV.

If you are worried you or your partner has been exposed to HIV, call 1800 PEP NOW or 1800 737 669 in NSW to find out if you're eligible for PEP and where you can get it.

Talk with your doctor to know more about PrEP and PEP.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

about HIV treatment and undetectable viral load, refer to the following websites:

- Ending HIV (ACON): endinghiv.org.au
- ASHM (Australasian Society for HIV Medicine): ashm.org.au
- Positive Life NSW: positivelife.org.au
- NAPWA (National Association of People with HIV Australia): napwa.org.au

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TOGETHER WE CAN END HIV

As gay men we should all know about HIV treatments, because whether you're poz or neg, treatment is one of the keys to ending HIV by 2020.

There are plenty of new and encouraging scientific and medical advances regarding HIV treatment in recent years. This booklet aims to answer questions you may have around the benefits and effectiveness of treatment, in particular the term "undetectable viral load" that pops up everywhere: blogs, medical journals, social media and even dating apps.

This booklet is meant to be a quick guide to some key facts, but of course, there is a lot more to know. It will also help guide you to find more information online, but for information that is tailored to your personal circumstances, your doctor will be able to give you more specific advice.

