

Considering HIV Treatment: The Basics

p o s i t i v e

facts

Starting HIV treatment is a big step: the following basic information about HIV and the HIV drugs will help you decide if it is the right step for you.

How does HIV work?

HIV is a virus that infects your blood and damages your body's ability to fight germs that can make you sick.

What is viral load?

Viral load is the amount of HIV in your blood. The higher the viral load, the faster HIV disease progresses.

What does the immune system do?

Your immune system works to keep you healthy. CD4 cells (also called T-cells) are a type of white blood cell that play an important role by helping to destroy germs in your body.

How does HIV affect the immune system?

HIV infects and kills your CD4 cells. If HIV is not controlled by treatment, your body eventually will lose so many CD4 cells that it will not be able to fight off germs and you will become vulnerable to opportunistic infections (OIs).

How do HIV medications work?

HIV medications stop HIV from multiplying and destroying your CD4 cells. This lowers your viral load so you can stay healthy.

When is it time to start HIV medications?

Your doctor will consider several things before recommending treatment:

- Viral load
- CD4 cell count
- Past and current health
- Readiness to start medication

What medications are available?

HIV medications fall into four groups or classes:

- “nukes” or NRTIs (nucleoside/nucleotide reverse transcriptase inhibitors)
- “non-nukes” or NNRTIs (non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors)
- PIs (protease inhibitors)
- Fusion Inhibitors

Each class of drugs attacks HIV at different parts of its life cycle. To best fight against the virus, your doctor will prescribe a combination of three or more drugs; this is called combination therapy or “HAART.”

What are the main goals of treatment?

- To get viral load as low as possible for as long as possible
- To improve the immune system by increasing CD4 cells
- To reduce the risk of developing opportunistic infections (OIs)

Do the medications always work?

After starting HIV drugs, most people see their viral load decrease and their CD4 cells increase. Over time, however, some people see their viral load increase, even though they are still taking HIV drugs. When a drug becomes less effective against HIV, we say that HIV has become “resistant” to that drug.

How do I know if I have resistant virus?

There are tests available that provide information on which drugs your virus has developed resistance to and which drugs should still work. Even if you have never taken HIV drugs, you may have resistant virus.

What happens if I develop resistance?

You will have to change one or more drugs in your regimen. However, resistance to one medicine often causes some resistance to other medicines in the same class. This is called “cross-resistance.” This does not necessarily mean that all the other drugs in that class will not work for you. But you will have to be careful when picking your next combination.

What is sequencing?

Increasingly, doctors carefully plan each patient's treatment strategy, so if resistance develops, other options will still be available. This is called sequencing.

What causes resistance?

Resistance most often occurs when medications are not taken correctly.

What is adherence?

Adherence means taking all your drugs exactly as prescribed by your doctor. Before deciding to start treatment, decide if you are ready to commit to taking HIV medications correctly every day.

Why is adherence important?

Skipping doses is a sure way to develop resistance. Good adherence is the best way to fight resistance.

Will I need to be on HIV medications forever?

None of the available medications can cure HIV. Most people will need to make a long-term commitment to stay on HIV medications in order to keep the virus under control.

Because of recent improvements in HIV treatments, many people think that HIV drug therapy offers a chance to stay healthy into the future. But it's a serious decision that will make life more challenging! Have your doctor answer all your questions about treatment and make decisions about your healthcare together.

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unrestricted educational grant from Pfizer Inc.