

LET'S TALK about



Sticking with your treatment plan

HOW ONGOING HIV CARE HELPS YOU LIVE A LONGER AND HEALTHIER LIFE

Your treatment plan is vital to your overall health (and to reducing HIV transmission)

HIV lasts a lifetime. So controlling HIV means making a lifetime commitment to your health.

That means taking your HIV medicines every time, at the right time, even when you're feeling good. It also means seeing your health care provider regularly for lab tests and discussions about your health and well-being.

Sticking with your treatment plan can be difficult at times. Let your health care provider help.

It's important to understand some of the challenges you may face and to think through how you will address them before they happen.

On the following pages you'll find answers to questions commonly asked by people living with HIV, along with tips and resources for sticking with your treatment plan.



***“It’s been 27 years since my diagnosis,
and I’m still here and I’m still
proof that you can live a productive life
and a healthy life if you stay with
medical care.”***

*Edward - Tyler, MS
Living with HIV since 1987.*

Q. How do HIV medicines work?



A. The drugs commonly used to treat HIV are called **antiretroviral therapy or ART**. For people with HIV, ART reduces the amount of virus that is in the blood (also called the “viral load”) and increases the amount of CD4 cells (also called “T-cells,” the cells that help your body fight infection).

You know ART is working if your viral load goes down and your CD4 cell count goes up.



ART can help keep you healthy for many years and greatly reduces your chance of transmitting HIV.

When taken consistently and correctly, ART helps to:

- ▶ *Reduce your viral load and HIV's ability to infect new CD4 cells.*
- ▶ *Increase your CD4 cell count.*
- ▶ *Keep your immune system healthy.*
- ▶ *Prevent other illnesses and "opportunistic infections."*
- ▶ *Greatly reduce (but not eliminate) the risk of passing HIV on to others (including babies, if you are or plan to become pregnant).*

Q. How do I take ART?

A. ART is usually taken as a combination of 3 or more drugs to reduce the amount of HIV in your body. Your health care provider and pharmacist will help you find a combination therapy that works best for you.

Some people on ART take several pills every day, with or without food. Others receive their combination therapy in a single pill.

There is not one “best” treatment.



The most important thing is to take your ART exactly the way your health care provider or pharmacist tells you to. So make sure you understand how to take your HIV medicines.

Topics to discuss with your health care provider or pharmacist:

- What each HIV medicine does.

- The dose (amount) of each medicine, including how many pills per dose.

- When to take each medicine, and any special considerations (for example, only at night, or only with food).

- What to do if you miss a dose.

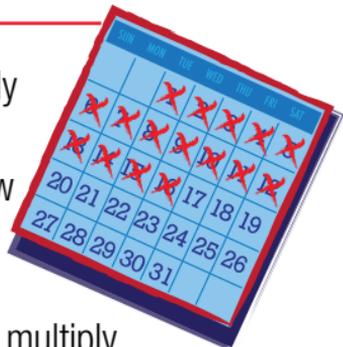
- Possible side effects from each medicine, including serious side effects.

- Other medicines you are taking and how they may interact with your ART.

Tell your health care provider if you have any personal issues that keep you from taking your medicines. Being depressed or using alcohol or drugs can make staying on your treatment plan difficult. Your health care provider can help you with these issues; some resources are listed on the back of this booklet.

Q. Why must I take HIV medicines every day?

A. Taking your HIV medicines exactly the way your health care provider tells you to will help keep your viral load low and your CD4 cell count high. If you skip your medicines, even now and then, you are giving HIV the chance to multiply and make you sick.



- ▶ ***If you realize you missed a dose,*** take the medicines as soon as you can, then take the next dose at your usual scheduled time (unless your pharmacist or health care provider has told you something different).



- ▶ ***If you find you miss a lot of doses,*** talk to your health care provider or pharmacist about ways to help you remember your medicines. You and your health care provider may even decide to change your ART to fit your health care needs and life situation, which may change over time.

Q. What if I'm too busy to take my medicines?

A. Taking medicine each day can be difficult but there are ways to make it easier and more convenient. Some ideas can be found on the ***"Tips" pages*** in this booklet.



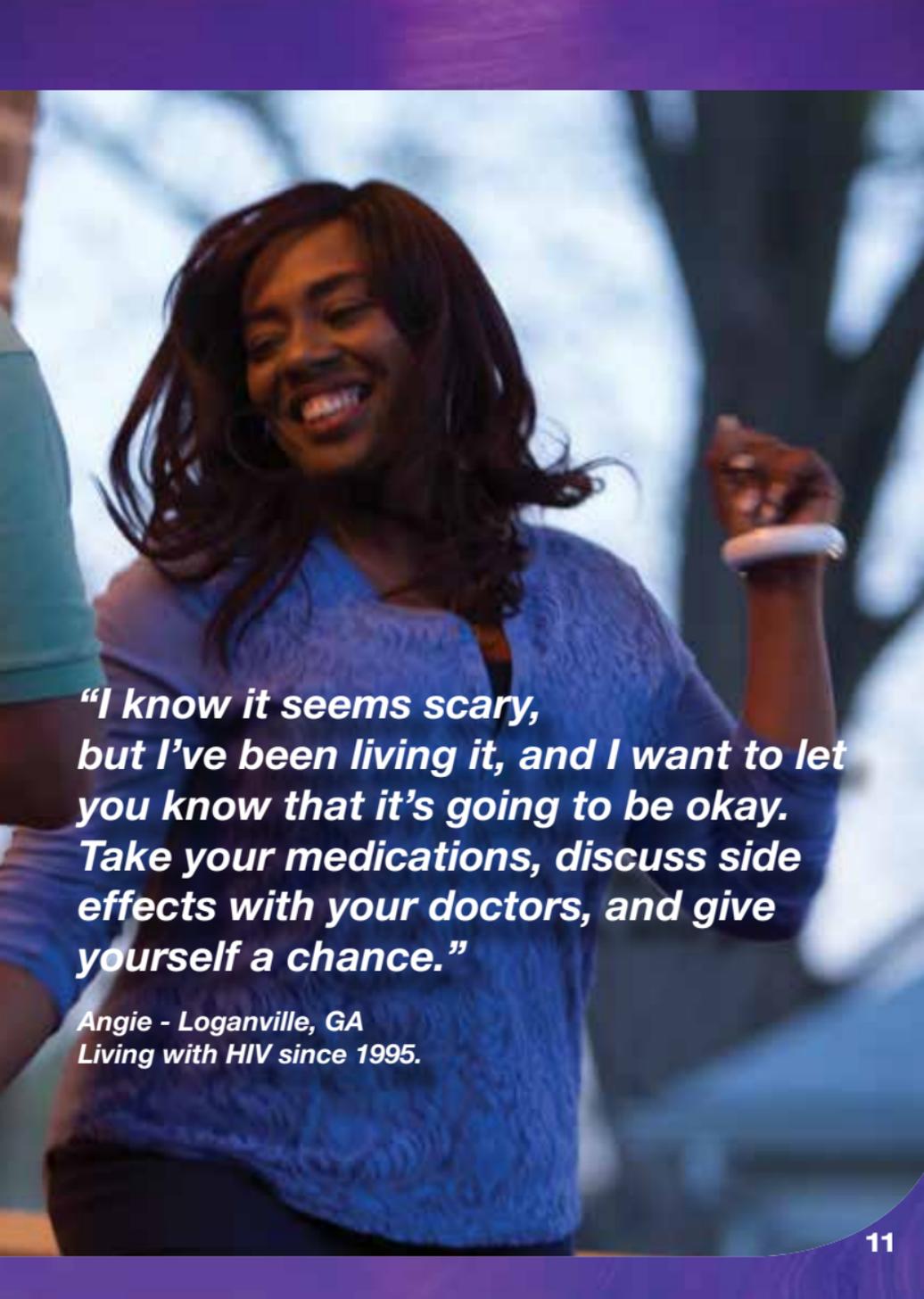
Q. Do I still take my HIV medicines if my viral load is undetectable?

A. ART is extremely effective and can reduce the level of HIV in the blood to such a low level that current HIV tests cannot detect it. This is called an undetectable viral load.

People with HIV who have undetectable viral loads are much more likely to live longer, healthier lives, and much less likely to infect others.

If you stop ART, your viral load will go up and the benefits of ART will go away.

So yes, continue to take your HIV medicines even when your viral load is undetectable.



***“I know it seems scary,
but I’ve been living it, and I want to let
you know that it’s going to be okay.
Take your medications, discuss side
effects with your doctors, and give
yourself a chance.”***

***Angie - Loganville, GA
Living with HIV since 1995.***

Q. What if I'm embarrassed about taking ART every day?

A. Lots of people take medicine every day to manage conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes. So if you take HIV medicines, you too are doing something good for your health. But you are entitled to your privacy. Your health care provider can work with you to make a plan for when and where to take your medicines.

You can be proud, because taking your HIV medicine daily is helping you lead a longer, healthier life.



Q. What do I do about side effects?

A. Any medicine can cause side effects, but not everyone experiences side effects from ART.

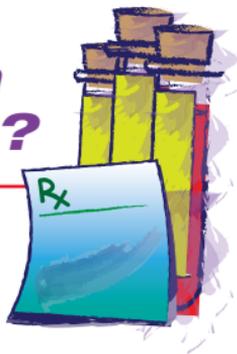
Side effects can differ for each person and each type of ART medicine. Some side effects can occur once you start a medicine and may only last a few days or weeks. Other side effects can start later and last longer.

Medicines are available to help reduce or eliminate side effects. Or you and your health care provider may decide to change your medicines or reduce the doses.

Contact your health care provider immediately if your treatment gives you problems.



Q. *What will happen at my medical visits?*



A. Taking ART consistently and correctly is a big part of your treatment plan, but it's not the only part. Regular, ongoing care includes:

▶ ***Blood tests***

to check your virus level and CD4 cell count.

▶ ***Physical exams and other lab tests***

to check your overall health; this includes monitoring for side effects and checking for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in addition to making sure your HIV medicines are working properly.

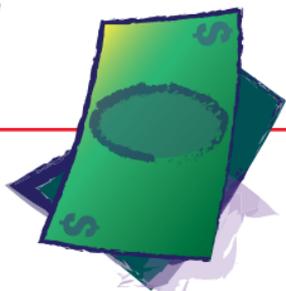
▶ ***Discussions with your health care provider***

about any issues that prevent you from sticking to your treatment plan.



Q. How can I afford all the medicines, lab tests, and medical appointments?

A. There are many programs and services available to help people who have limited or no insurance and people who can't afford to buy medicines or see their providers. Please see the back of this booklet for help in finding these programs.



Q. What else can I do to avoid passing HIV on to others?

A. Taking your HIV medicines every day is most important. But there are other things you can do to stay healthy and reduce the risk of passing HIV on to others.



▶ **Use condoms consistently** and correctly.

For tips on talking to your partner about condoms, visit [cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking/convo.html#panel4](https://www.cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking/convo.html#panel4).

▶ **Choose safer sexual behaviors**

because some have high risk for passing on HIV (such as anal or vaginal sex without a condom) while others have little to no risk (such as touching or oral sex). You can find information at [cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks](https://www.cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks).

▶ **Get tested for STDs** at least once a year if you are sexually active. STDs can make your HIV worse and make you more likely to pass HIV on to others.

▶ **Encourage an HIV-negative partner** to ask a health care provider about pre-exposure prophylaxis (**PrEP**), medicines prescribed by a health care provider and taken every day to reduce the risk of becoming infected. For emergency situations, such as if a condom breaks during sex with an HIV-negative partner, do not share your ART. Instead, your partner should see a health care provider who can prescribe post-exposure prophylaxis (**PEP**) as soon as possible and always within 72 hours of the exposure.

▶ **Get help** for depression or alcohol/drug use. When people are sad or high, they are less likely to choose safer sexual behaviors. So they may forget to use a condom or may have sex with more partners. You can find helpful resources on the back of this booklet.

A photograph of two Black men in a kitchen. The man on the left is wearing a light-colored dress shirt and a dark tie, looking towards the man on the right. The man on the right is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and is smiling broadly at the camera. The background shows wooden kitchen cabinets and a whiteboard.

“Things will slip your mind because that has happened to me before. I started setting reminders in my phone. So definitely set a reminder around the time where you normally eat and take it during that time every day.”

***Cedric - Bryant, AR
Living with HIV since 2013.***

Don't forget to ask for help from your health care providers, friends, and family. Together, you can find a successful way to make sticking with your treatment plan a daily part of a longer, healthier life.

Tips to help you stick with your treatment plan

- ▶ Take your medicines at the ***same time*** each day.
- ▶ ***Match your medicine schedule*** to your life: add taking your medicines to things you already do each day, like brushing your teeth or eating a meal.
- ▶ ***Try a pill tray with compartments for each day of the week*** so you can see whether or not you took your pills that day.
- ▶ ***Set the alarm*** on your clock, watch, or cell phone for the time you take your medicines.

Tips to help you stick with your treatment plan (continued)



- ▶ **Use a calendar** to check off the days you have taken your medicines, and circle the date of your next medical appointment.
- ▶ **Download a free app** that can help remind you of your medical appointments and when it's time to take your medicines. Search “**reminder apps**” to see many choices.
- ▶ **Visit HIV Treatment Works**, a multi-media website featuring real stories and strategies for long-term success.
- ▶ **Keep a reminder note** on a mirror, on your refrigerator, or anywhere else you will see it each day. Put your next appointment card there, too.

- ▶ **Be prepared** for your medical appointments. Before an appointment, write down questions or concerns you want to discuss with your health care provider.
- ▶ Make sure your health care providers have your **correct contact information** (telephone number, address, e-mail), and let them know if any contact information changes.
- ▶ **If you can't keep** a scheduled appointment, contact your providers to let them know, and make a new appointment as soon as possible.
- ▶ **Communicate openly** and honestly with your health care providers so they have the most accurate information to help you.
- ▶ Get additional tips on sticking to your treatment plan by joining a **support group** or online chat forum for people living with HIV.



Glossary

- **Antiretroviral therapy (ART):** A combination of HIV medicines that keeps the virus from growing and multiplying.
- **CD4 cells (also called “T-cells”):** Cells that send signals to activate the body’s immune response when they detect “intruders” such as viruses or bacteria.
- **CD4 count:** The number of CD4 cells in your blood.
- **Combination therapy:** Taking more than one HIV medicine at the same time. Combination therapy is often required for ART to be effective.
- **Immune system:** Cells, tissues, and organs in the body that work together to protect the body from infection.
- **Medicine schedule:** The dosages of each of the medicines you take and the time of day when you take them.
- **Opportunistic infections:** Infections that are common with HIV that take advantage of the body’s weakened immune system and can cause devastating illnesses.

- ***Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP):*** HIV medicines that are taken within 72 hours after exposure to HIV to reduce the risk of becoming infected. The medicines are prescribed by a health care provider and taken for 28 days.
- ***Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP):*** HIV medicines that can be prescribed for people who are not HIV-positive but are at risk for HIV to reduce the risk of becoming infected. PrEP must be taken every day, and people must return to their health care provider every 3 months for monitoring and follow-up.
- ***Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs):*** Infections that you can get from having sex with someone who has the infection. There are more than 20 types of STDs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes, HIV/AIDS, human papilloma virus (HPV), syphilis, and trichomoniasis.
- ***Treatment plan:*** The medicines, medical appointments, lab tests, and support services you need to treat your virus.
- ***Undetectable viral load:*** The point at which the amount of HIV in your blood is too low to be measured by today's methods.
- ***Viral load:*** The level of HIV in the blood.

Resources



[**cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks**](http://cdc.gov/hivtreatmentworks)

has access to information and resources for people living with HIV, featuring real people from across the United States talking about how sticking with treatment helps them stay healthy; protect others; do what they love; and live a longer, healthier life.

[**cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html**](http://cdc.gov/hiv/basics/prep.html)

provides important information for your HIV-negative sexual or drug-injecting partners.

[**cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html**](http://cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html)

provides information on medicines for HIV-negative people accidentally exposed (for example, if a condom breaks).

[**naccho.org/about/lhd**](http://naccho.org/about/lhd)

helps you find your local health department for Medicaid information.

[**findhivcare.hrsa.gov/search_HAB.aspx**](http://findhivcare.hrsa.gov/search_HAB.aspx)

helps you find a nearby Ryan White Program (or call 877-646-4772).

1-800-662-4357

offers mental health, alcohol, or drug use services.

1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)

for general information about HIV and its treatment.

