

# ABOUT HIV

## HIV treatment

If you are 'HIV positive' this means that you have a virus called HIV in your body. It doesn't mean that you are ill, or that you have AIDS, or that you are dying.

If you have HIV but don't take treatment, HIV will slowly attack the immune system, which is your body's ability to fight other infections.

But there are drug treatments for HIV. They can stop HIV reproducing, and so limit the damage to your immune system and keep you in good health. Because of these drugs, many people living with HIV can expect to have a normal life expectancy.

'AIDS' is different from HIV. AIDS can happen if somebody goes a long time without treatment and the immune system becomes very weak. It means that a person with HIV is at risk of developing serious infections and illnesses that a healthy immune system would be able to fight off.

Thanks to drug treatments, few people now develop AIDS. If they do, they can usually recover from it.

The initials in HIV stand for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

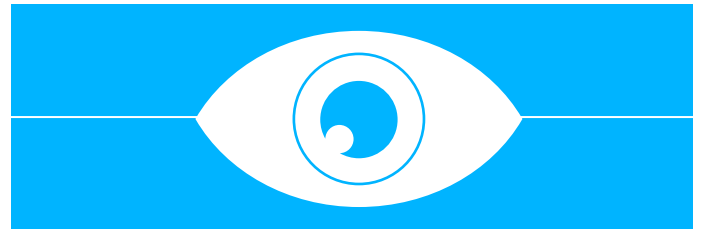
### How HIV progresses

HIV weakens the immune system quite slowly, so you won't necessarily feel unwell. You may have briefly had something a bit like a flu during the first few weeks after infection – this is known as a 'seroconversion illness'. After that, most people who don't take treatment have pretty good health for anything between two and fifteen years. The average is around seven years.

But not many people are diagnosed with HIV immediately after getting infected. There's often a gap of months or years.

If you've only had HIV for a short time, you may have good health for several years, without feeling the need for HIV treatment.

On the other hand, if you had HIV for a long time before testing, you may already be ill and your doctor may recommend that you start HIV treatment straightaway. Being ill, finding out you have HIV and being asked to make decisions about treatment can be a lot to deal with all at the same time.



### Keeping an eye on your health

From someone's physical appearance, you can't tell if they have HIV or not. And you can't always know how good their health is.

But blood tests can show how HIV is affecting your health. Whether or not you are taking treatment, it's important to have some tests done regularly.

One important test is called a CD4 count and is a measure of the strength of your immune system. A low CD4 count means that HIV is damaging your immune system. A higher CD4 count shows that your immune system is stronger.

Another test is called viral load. It's a measure of the amount of HIV in a sample of blood. If you are taking treatment, the viral load test shows how well your treatment is working – the lower it is, the better.

You'll probably be asked to have these tests done every few months. They will help you and your doctor make decisions about your health and treatment.

### HIV treatment

HIV treatment stops the virus from reproducing and reduce the amount of HIV inside your body.

- If there is less HIV, there is less damage to your immune system, and you are less likely to get ill.
- And if there is less HIV in your body fluids, you are less likely to pass on HIV (for example to a sexual partner, or during pregnancy).

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**A collaboration between:** NAM aidsmap, European AIDS Treatment Group, Aids Action Europe, East Europe & Central Asia Union of PLWH and ITPCru (The Treatment Preparedness Coalition).

**For more information:** [www.about-hiv.info](http://www.about-hiv.info); [www.pro-vich.info](http://www.pro-vich.info); [www.aidsmap.com](http://www.aidsmap.com)

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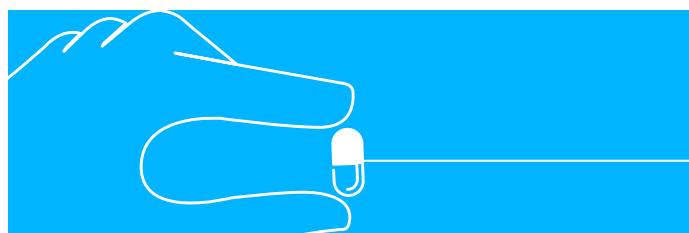
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The aim of HIV treatment is to have an 'undetectable' viral load – this means there is only a tiny amount of HIV in the body. But the drugs are not a cure – they cannot totally wipe out HIV from your body.

Everybody living with HIV can benefit from HIV treatment. The sooner you start to take it, the sooner it will protect you from future health problems.

But you should only start treatment when you're ready for it. Give yourself enough time to find out about your options and make your own mind up.



### Your treatment

HIV treatment usually involves taking tablets once or twice a day. You will usually be taking a combination of three or four medicines – each one works against HIV in a different way and all of the medicines need to be taken together to work properly.

Sometimes two or three medicines are combined into a single tablet.

Sometimes the name and the colour of one of your medicines may change. It may still be the same medicine, but manufactured by a different company.

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