

ABOUT HIV

Treatment side-effects

Like any other medicines, the drugs used to treat HIV can have unwanted effects that are sometimes unpleasant or can even make you unwell. These are called side-effects.

The benefits of HIV treatment by far outweigh the risk of side-effects. HIV treatment can give you the chance of a normal lifespan. Putting off starting treatment because of concerns about side-effects could increase your risk of becoming unwell.

The anti-HIV drugs used today cause far fewer side-effects than those that were commonly prescribed in the past. The choice of drugs is much greater now. Potential side-effects are something that you and your doctor should consider when choosing your anti-HIV drugs.

You don't have to accept side-effects as a fact of life. Tell your doctor about any side-effects you experience – you may be able to take an extra medicine to deal with the problem. Alternatively, you may need to change your anti-HIV drugs. But you shouldn't stop taking your treatment without talking to your doctor.

Side-effects soon after starting treatment

Most side-effects occur after you have been taking a medicine for a week or two, because your body is getting used to the drug. Over time, your body gets used to the medicine and side-effects usually lessen or become easier to live with.

Typical side-effects in the first few weeks include diarrhoea, feeling sick (nausea), being sick (vomiting), headache, mood and sleep problems, rashes and tiredness.

In this period, your doctor may suggest other medicines to control your symptoms. So, for example, if you have diarrhoea as a side-effect, then taking an anti-diarrhoea medication for a short time may be helpful.

If these problems don't go away after a few months, tell your doctor how you're feeling. You may need to change treatment.

Allergic reactions

A much less common, but very important, type of side-effect soon after starting treatment is an allergic reaction. These happen to very few people, but can be dangerous.

Less than 1 in 50 people taking specific anti-HIV drugs have an allergic reaction. These drugs are abacavir, nevirapine, etravirine and raltegravir.

If you are about to start one of the drugs, it is a good idea to talk to your doctor about the possible signs of an allergic reaction (such as a rash). Before taking abacavir you should have a blood test to see if you have a particular gene (HLA-B*5701) as the drug is not recommended for people who have this gene.

You should contact your doctor immediately if you think you might be having an allergic reaction.



Longer term side-effects

Despite the great benefits of HIV treatment, some anti-HIV drugs have been linked to an increased risk of bone problems, heart disease, kidney problems and liver disease developing.

After starting HIV treatment you should have regular blood tests to monitor these issues. These tests can identify small changes in how your body is working, so that you and your doctor can decide to make changes to your treatment, or take other action, before any serious problems develop. You should also mention any unusual symptoms to your doctor.

Some older HIV drugs cause a collection of side-effects known as lipodystrophy, which leads to changes in body shape and blood fats. Some older drugs have also been associated with a rare, but serious long-term side-effect called lactic acidosis. Modern anti-HIV drugs do not cause these problems.

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For more information: www.about-hiv.info; www.pro-vich.info; www.aidsmap.com

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