



Speak up for your Health!

WE ARE IN IT TOGETHER.



In It Together

IMPROVING HEALTH LITERACY FOR BLACK MSM



Good health starts with understanding

You can live a healthy and active life with HIV

This guide is designed to help you find, understand, and use information about your HIV care so you can make health care choices that are right for you.

Health information, especially about HIV care, can be confusing. But it is important that you understand what HIV is, how HIV may affect your life, and what you can do to live a long and healthy life with HIV. You should ask questions about your HIV care every time you visit your health care provider. Understanding how to care for yourself is the first step to good health.

These questions can help you start a conversation with your care team.

- 1. What** do I need to do?
- 2. Why** is it important for me to do this?
- 3. How** do I do it?

I have HIV and I am worried. Who is going to care for me?"

Many different people will provide you with HIV care and services. These people are your HIV care team. Your care team includes your HIV doctor, nurse, case manager, pharmacist, dentist, therapist — and most importantly, YOU. Sometimes, the people on your care team are located in different places.

What does my care team do?

HIV affects many aspects of your health, so your care team does more than just treat HIV. Your care team is committed to helping you understand HIV and make decisions that will keep you healthy. Ask any member of your care team to explain and repeat anything you don't understand about your care – such as who you need to see, where you need to go, or why you need a test.

Why do I need so many tests?

Once you test positive for HIV, your care team will ask you to do a number of laboratory tests to check your health. Some tests are done soon after you learn you are HIV positive. Other tests are done once you begin seeing a doctor. The tests help you and your care team know what medicine or care you need. The tests also help you and your care team learn if your treatment plan needs to change.

What do the tests tell me?

Your doctor will test the number of **CD4 cells** or **T-cells** in your blood to see how well your immune system is working to fight infection. This is called your **CD4 count**.

Your doctor will also test how much HIV is in your blood. This is called your **viral load**. If your viral load is high, your immune system isn't working as well to fight the virus.

Your doctor will also test how well your body is working, such as your kidneys, liver, and blood cells. Tests also help your care team know whether you have other diseases that also require attention.



“ I heard there’s no cure for HIV, so what will the medicine do for me?”

While it’s true that there is still no cure for HIV, taking your medicine each day as instructed by your doctor will help you control the virus and achieve an undetectable viral load (viral suppression). **The drugs used to treat HIV are called antiretrovirals (ARV). These drugs are always given in combination with other antiretrovirals, and this combination therapy is called antiretroviral therapy (ART).**

What is an undetectable viral load (viral suppression)?

An undetectable viral load means that a blood test cannot find HIV in your blood. You still have HIV in your body, but there is so little that it cannot be found. This is also called viral suppression.

Why is it important to have an undetectable viral load?

HIV is a lifelong condition. By getting to an undetectable viral load, you can stay healthy and live longer. If you have an undetectable viral load, you cannot pass HIV to another person.

How do I get to an undetectable viral load?

Visit your HIV care team regularly and follow your doctor’s instructions. Take your HIV medicine at the same time every day.

HIV medicine works by decreasing the amount of virus in your blood, which is known as your viral load. The lower your viral load, the healthier you will be. Be sure that you know what medicine to take and when to take it before you leave your doctor’s office.

I don't want to talk about my HIV...yet."

Your care team understands that talking about HIV can be difficult.

They will help you understand HIV and how to treat the virus. Your care team is completely committed to your privacy and will not share your information with anyone else. But the more information you give your care team, the more help they can give you.

Your care team will listen to your concerns and can help you get the services you need, including counseling and support.

What do I need to do first?

Trust your doctor. While there is no cure for HIV, there is medicine that can help you live a long, healthy life. Your doctor is your treatment partner and will help you find the right HIV medicine to keep you healthy.

Once you start taking HIV medicine, you should take it as instructed by your HIV doctor. You should take your HIV medicine at the same time every day. You should also visit your care team regularly to make sure the medicine is working. Talk to your care team about any concerns you may have about taking HIV medicine.

Why is it important that I start treatment now?

You want to get healthy and stay healthy. The sooner you start taking HIV medicine, the faster you can get the virus under control and keep it from damaging your body. Talk to your doctor about when you can start taking medicine. Tell your doctor if there are times of the day when it will be hard for you to take your medicine as well as any other concerns that you have about your medicine.



I've taken medicine before, but I'm not great at taking it every day."

Taking your HIV medicine when and how you are supposed to can be hard, but it's very important for your health. Your HIV care team can help you get back on track and give you tools to help you take your medicine every day.

What do I need to do?

Talk to your care team about any challenges you have taking your HIV medicine. Tell your care team if you can't get to the pharmacy to get your prescription filled, or if you can't afford your prescriptions. Tell your care team if it is hard for you to get to your check-ups. Your care team can help you create scheduling reminders, find ways to pay for your medicine, or find ways to get you to your check-ups.

Why is taking my HIV medicine every day important?

Care and treatment for HIV is a lifelong process that includes taking your medicine every day and seeing your HIV care team regularly.

HIV medicines work by decreasing the amount of virus in your blood, which is known as your **viral load**. The lower your viral load, the healthier you will be. For your HIV medicine to lower your viral load you need to take them every day.

You may experience side effects from your HIV medicine. Talk to your HIV care team about managing these side effects, and ask about other medication options. Make a list of any questions or concerns you have and bring these with you to your next appointment.

How do I make sure my HIV medicine is working?

For the medicine to work and for you to stay healthy, you must:

1. Take your HIV medicine at the same time, every day.
2. Take the right number of pills.
3. Follow your doctor's instructions about what food and drink you can have with your HIV medicine.
4. See your doctor or nurse regularly to make sure that the medicines are working. They will run tests (lab work) to confirm this.
5. Call your doctor or nurse if you have a question about your lab work or how to take your medicine.





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Besides taking my medicine, what can I do to stay healthy?”

Staying on your HIV medicine and seeing your HIV care team regularly are key steps to achieving and maintaining viral suppression. But living a long, healthy life with HIV is about more than taking your medicine.

How do I stay healthy?

Talk to your HIV care team about staying healthy and managing medicine side effects. Make a list of any questions or concerns you have and talk about them with your care team at your next appointment.

What else do I need to do?

Eat well. A nutritious diet will help you keep your energy up. A healthy diet, supports your immune system.

Exercise. Exercise, such as walking, weight training, or playing a sport, will help you build strength and energy. Exercise also improves your mood, and helps you get a good night's sleep.

Get plenty of sleep. Quality sleep helps improve your mood, energy levels, and your immune system.

Limit Stress. It's impossible to eliminate all stress from your life. But finding ways to limit and manage stress will improve your concentration. Limiting and managing your stress also improves your mood and supports your overall health.

How do I learn more about my HIV care?"

Remember, good health starts with understanding! If you don't understand something about your HIV care, ask your care team:

1. **What** do I need to do?
2. **Why** is it important to do this?
3. **How** do I do it?

Learn more from these websites

Positive Spin

Learn how to connect to care, start treatment, stay in care, and keep the virus under control.

<https://positivespin.hiv.gov>

AIDS Info

Learn about HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and research.

<https://aidsinfo.nih.gov>

Start Talking. Stop HIV.

Learn how to reduce new HIV infections by talking about HIV prevention strategies and other sexual health issues with your partner.

<http://www.cdc.gov/actagainstaids/campaigns/starttalking/index.html>

HIV.gov

Learn more about HIV treatment, research, and staying healthy with HIV.

<https://www.hiv.gov/>

