

WHAT IS HIV TREATMENT?

HIV treatment is the use of medications (antiretroviral therapies) which can help keep an HIV infected person healthy. Drug research and development is ongoing. While current treatment can help people living with HIV at all stages of the disease, it cannot cure HIV infection.

Individuals are unique, from their biology to their lifestyle, and therefore HIV treatment is complex and should be tailored to meet the needs of each individual.

WHAT IS ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY?

Antiretroviral therapy (often called 'ARV therapy' or 'ART') is drug therapy that has been developed to disrupt the cycle of HIV replication. ARVs come in a variety of formulations designed to act at different stages of the HIV virus life-cycle. ART usually consists of a combination of three or four different drugs, which can delay HIV replication and immune system deterioration within the body. Administering ARVs in combination is called *Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART)* which is often more casually referred to as a 'drug cocktail'.

WHAT DOES ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY DO?

HIV is a retrovirus. Retroviruses enter a human host cell and use it to multiply.

Knowing that HIV is a retrovirus is important to understanding how HIV treatment works. HIV treatment works by preventing HIV from attaching to, entering and replicating within a human host cell.

There are many different 'classes' of ARVs. Each 'class' of ARVs works to fight HIV infection by interrupting various stages of the HIV replication cycle. Some stop or slow down the process of HIV replication within the body, while others work by helping the body to limit the damage HIV has done to the immune system.

Deciding on a combination of ART is something that an individual usually does in consultation with their doctor or other health care professionals. When deciding upon the most

suitable combination for an individual, several factors are considered including but not limited to: viral load, CD4 count, previous treatments and experiences to those treatments, dosages and adherence particulars (how drugs should be taken).

WHAT ARE SOME SIDE EFFECTS OF ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY?

The medicines that make up ART often come with side effects. Different people may have different reactions to different treatment combinations. Some people experience mild side effects while others may experience more severe side effects. For some, combinations are easily tolerated and no negative side effects are experienced.

Side effects tend to be most common among individuals recently after starting ART or following changes to a treatment regimen. Side effects may be manageable and may improve or disappear over time. They may also persist and impact a person's quality of life.

Common side effects may include but are not limited to:

- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Anemia
- ▶ Digestive problems
- ▶ Gas and bloating
- ▶ Dry mouth
- ▶ Diarrhea
- ▶ Nausea

It is always important to discuss side effects with your doctor. If side effects last longer than a few days or seem to be getting worse, a doctor should be contacted immediately.

WHAT IS HIV DRUG RESISTANCE?

HIV drug resistance occurs when antiretroviral drugs lose their ability to work within a person's body. There are several factors which contribute to occurrences of drug resistance during an individual's course of antiretroviral therapy which include:

- ▶ Poor treatment adherence: not taking medications as or when recommended.
- ▶ Poor absorption: a result of not taking medication with food or when diarrhea and vomiting is experienced and drugs are expelled from the gut too quickly.
- ▶ Viral mutation: the treatment is no longer responsive because the HIV virus has adapted to work around the treatment.

ARE THERE ANY COMPLIMENTARY AND/OR ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES AVAILABLE?

Complementary or alternative medicines generally do not fit Western, biomedical models of health care and treatment. Regardless, many people choose to include alternative therapies in their HIV care regime since these therapies can promote wellness, reduce stress, relieve some of the side effects of ART and may have other additional benefits. It is for these reasons that some people may also decide to use alternative therapies exclusively. Remember, it is your body and your life. You have the right to choose to do what feels best for you.

Here are some examples of alternative therapies:

Traditional healing practices

- ▶ Ayurvedic
- ▶ Acupuncture
- ▶ Indigenous healing

Physical therapies

- ▶ Chiropractic
- ▶ Massage
- ▶ Yoga

Homeopathy or herbs

- ▶ Chinese herbalism
- ▶ Aromatherapy

Energy work

- ▶ Polarity therapy
- ▶ Reiki

Relaxation techniques

- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Visualization

Dietary supplements

- ▶ Vitamins And Minerals

Other supportive interventions

- ▶ Art therapy
- ▶ Clinical counselling
- ▶ Peer-support group

ONLINE RESOURCES

- ▶ **AEGIS (AIDS Education Global Information System):** www.aegis.com
- ▶ **AIDS Meds.com:** www.aidsmeds.com
- ▶ **The Body: Comprehensive HIV/AIDS resource:** www.thebody.com