

# THE POWER OF UNDETECTABLE

How HIV Treatment  
Prevents Transmission



 **CATIE**

# HIV TREATMENT TO PREVENT HIV



## **If you are living with HIV, taking HIV treatment can help you to live a long and healthy life.**

Another important benefit of HIV treatment is that it helps prevent HIV from passing to others. This is just one of many prevention options that make it easier than ever to prevent HIV.

Successful HIV treatment that lowers the amount of virus in your body to undetectable levels (called having an undetectable viral load), means you will not pass HIV to the people you have sex with. This is life-changing for many people living with HIV, because it can reduce the anxiety about passing HIV and helps to reduce HIV stigma.

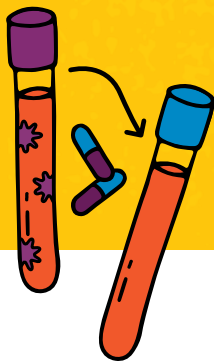
Having an undetectable viral load also lowers the chance of passing HIV when sharing equipment for injecting drugs, but we don't know by exactly how much.

For people who want to get pregnant, maintaining an undetectable viral load throughout pregnancy prevents HIV from being passed to the baby during pregnancy and delivery.

In short, taking treatment and having an undetectable viral load not only helps people living with HIV to stay healthy, but it can also prevent HIV from passing to others.

To learn more about this way of preventing HIV and how you can make it work for you, read on.

# FIRST, A FEW BASICS



## What is an undetectable viral load?

HIV viral load refers to the amount of HIV in the blood of a person living with HIV. If you take HIV treatment consistently as prescribed by your doctor, you can reduce your viral load to a level too low to be detected by a blood test. Once your viral load has fallen to this level, it is said to be undetectable. For most people, this happens after they take HIV treatment consistently for three to six months. Having an undetectable viral load is good for your immune system and for your long-term health.

Having an undetectable viral load does not mean you are cured of HIV. The virus is still in your body. If you stop taking HIV treatment or miss too many doses, your viral load will once again become detectable.

## How can I reduce my viral load and keep it at undetectable levels?

To get your viral load to undetectable levels (and keep it there) you need to take your HIV meds as prescribed and see your doctor regularly.

The only way to know if your viral load is undetectable is to regularly have a blood test called a viral load test. You and your doctor will decide how often you should have a viral load test (probably every three to six months).

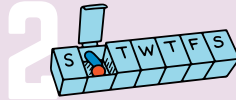


It is important to take your HIV meds consistently as prescribed to get and maintain an undetectable viral load.

To help you stay on top of your pill-taking schedule, you can:



Set an alarm on your cell phone or watch to remind you that it's time to take your pills



Use a pill organizer to keep track of your pills



Ask your pharmacist to package your pills in blister packs



Download a free app if you have a smartphone to remind you to take your medication

If you're having trouble taking your meds as prescribed, talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or someone at a local HIV organization.

## When it comes to sex, **UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE**

When you maintain an undetectable viral load, you **cannot pass HIV** to the people you have sex with. This is true no matter what kinds of sex you are having, and no matter your gender or sexual orientation. It is also true whether or not a condom is used.

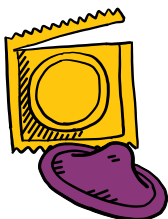


You may have heard the phrase **undetectable = untransmittable (U=U)** for short). This phrase was created to get the word out about the benefits of treatment for preventing HIV during sex.

To prevent passing HIV sexually, doctors generally recommend waiting until you've had at least two undetectable viral load results in a row over a six-month period before depending on this strategy.

Studies have shown that a person cannot pass HIV through sex if their viral load is below 200 copies per millilitre. However, it is best for your health if your viral load is below 50 copies per millilitre (that is, your viral load is undetectable by the tests most commonly used in Canada). That is why doctors recommend aiming to get your viral load below 50 copies per millilitre.

Some people see occasional blips in their viral load. A blip is when your viral load becomes detectable at a very low level on one test and then becomes undetectable again on the next test. A single blip is no reason to panic. It does not mean that your treatment has stopped working, or that you can pass HIV through sex. If you have two detectable results in a row, you and your doctor should talk about your options.



## Preventing sexually transmitted infections

Having an undetectable viral load does not prevent other STIs (sexually transmitted infections), such as chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhoea and syphilis. Condoms can reduce the risk of many STIs, so you might want to use condoms to help prevent STIs.



## If I have an undetectable viral load, do I still need to tell someone I have sex with that I have HIV?

Even though there is no chance of passing HIV through sex if you have an undetectable viral load, you may still be legally required to tell your sex partner(s) that you have HIV. At the time this booklet was published there were different rules in different regions of Canada. HIV activists are working to get laws across Canada changed to reflect the science. For the most up-to-date information on when people living with HIV have a legal duty to disclose their HIV status, contact the HIV Legal Network ([www.hivlegalnetwork.ca](http://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca)).

## What if I have a detectable viral load?

If you consistently take your HIV meds and you continue to have a detectable viral load, work with your medical team to find a combination of HIV meds that might work better for you.

If you continue to have a detectable viral load, rest assured that there are many ways to prevent passing HIV. Flip to the end of this booklet for more information about other ways that you and your sex partners can prevent HIV from passing.

## When it comes to drug use, USING NEW EQUIPMENT IS STILL SAFEST

If you inject drugs and share needles or other equipment, maintaining an undetectable viral load lowers the chance of passing HIV. However, we don't know exactly how much the chance of passing HIV is reduced.



It is best to use new equipment each time you inject drugs, to prevent passing HIV and other infections such as hepatitis B and C.

## Having an HIV-NEGATIVE BABY

**If you are pregnant, or you want to have a child, HIV treatment can allow you to have an HIV-negative baby.**



If you start HIV treatment before pregnancy and maintain an undetectable viral load throughout your pregnancy, you will not pass HIV to your baby during pregnancy or delivery. If you are not on treatment when you first get pregnant, starting HIV treatment as soon as possible dramatically lowers the chance of passing HIV to your baby.

If you do not have an HIV doctor, your local HIV organization may be able to help you get connected with one. When you tell your doctor that you are planning to have a baby or you are pregnant, they will review your HIV meds to make sure they can be taken during pregnancy.

Try to find an obstetrician who you trust and feel comfortable talking to honestly. It is a good idea to look for an obstetrician who has experience with HIV care. However, this might not be possible if you live in a small town or rural community.





To reduce the chance of HIV passing to your baby, Canadian guidelines recommend:



taking HIV treatment before you get pregnant and during pregnancy and labour



having a vaginal (frontal) delivery for most pregnancies; only in a few cases will a C-section (surgery to deliver a baby) be necessary



giving HIV meds to your baby for a short time after birth



feeding the baby formula, and not breastfeeding (chestfeeding), because HIV can be passed through breast milk even if the parent is on successful HIV treatment.

Talk to a healthcare provider you trust if you wish to breastfeed (chestfeed) or if you have questions about infant feeding as there may still be a small risk of HIV transmission even when you have an undetectable viral load. If you choose to breastfeed (chestfeed) your baby, it is important to work with a knowledgeable healthcare provider who can monitor your health and support you and your baby.

## Other ways TO PREVENT HIV

Maintaining an undetectable viral load is just one of many ways to prevent HIV.



Here are some other highly effective ways that you, your sex partners and the people you use drugs with can prevent HIV:



### 1 Condoms

Condoms are a great way to help prevent HIV and other STIs during sex. There are external (sometimes called male) and internal (sometimes called female) condoms. The chance of HIV passing is very low if you use condoms the right way each time you have sex.



### 2 Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)

PrEP is a combination of two meds that an HIV-negative person can take on an ongoing basis, starting before and continuing after they might come into contact with HIV. It needs to be prescribed by a healthcare provider. For PrEP to work, it is important that the pills are taken as prescribed. Besides taking pills, PrEP involves seeing a doctor or nurse every three months for HIV testing, screening for STIs and other infections, monitoring for possible side effects, and ongoing support.

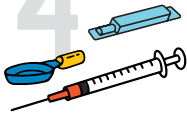
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## Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

PEP is a combination of three meds that an HIV-negative person can take after they might have come into contact with HIV, to help prevent them from getting HIV. For example, someone might choose to use PEP after a condom breaks during sex or after they share needles or other equipment to inject drugs. It is prescribed by a healthcare provider. PEP should be taken as soon as possible after the exposure, and certainly within 72 hours. PEP needs to be taken every day for 28 days. A person who wants to take PEP should immediately contact their doctor, a hospital emergency department or a sexual health clinic to ask how to get it.

4



## New equipment for using drugs

When injecting drugs, it's best to use new needles, syringes, filters, cookers, acidifiers, alcohol swabs, tourniquets and sterile water each time. There is no chance of passing HIV or hepatitis B and C if you use new equipment each time you inject drugs.

### MORE INFO

To learn more about HIV treatment and how it can prevent HIV transmission visit [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca).



Canada's source for  
HIV and hepatitis C  
information

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