

# MEDICATION ADHERENCE

*Modern human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) medicines are making it possible for people living with HIV (PLHIV) to live healthy lives with almost normal lifespans. It is crucial for PLHIV to take their HIV treatments as prescribed. Knowing about these treatments, which are generally referred to as antiretroviral therapies (ART), will help people take them successfully, minimising side effects, and improving their effectiveness.*

*There are six different classes of ART, each attacks a different part of the virus, preventing it from replicating. When treatment is successful, the amount of virus in a person's body will be reduced significantly, ideally to an undetectable level. Undetectable means the amount of virus, or viral load, is so low that cannot be detected by current blood tests. A person who has an undetectable viral load is significantly less likely to pass on the virus.*

## **WHAT IS COMBINATION ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY?**

Combination antiretroviral therapy is the use of three or more classes of ART. This means the virus is attacked in different ways, making it more effective in the long term, and preventing resistance to any one medication. Though highly effective, ART is not a cure for HIV.

## **WHO PRESCRIBES ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY?**

Not just any doctor can prescribe ART. A general practitioner must complete a specific course before prescribing ART, which belong to a class of drugs called S100 drugs. Specialists (usually based at hospitals) may also prescribe them. In certain circumstances, registered nurses may also prescribe them.

## **HOW ARE ANTIRETROVIRAL MEDICINES TAKEN?**

Almost all ART drugs are taken orally in tablet form. Each medication comes with different instructions regarding how often it needs to be taken, whether it needs to be taken with food or on an empty stomach, or whether certain foods or supplements need to be avoided.

## **ADHERING TO THE THERAPY**

Taking ART correctly is called adherence. It is critical that the instructions be followed. For some people, the complexity of instructions for taking several medications can lead to them missing doses. PLHIV, their carers, and care workers need to understand the specific requirements of each medication to ensure no doses are missed.

## RESISTANCE TO ANTIRETROVIRAL MEDICINES

HIV is very adaptable, and can develop resistance to particular medications if they are taken improperly; meaning a particular medication may no longer work. For some who have lived with HIV for several decades, this limits treatment options, potentially leaving a person with few or no choices.

## SIDE-EFFECTS

Though many people never experience side effects from ART, it isn't uncommon. Usually they take the form of nausea, diarrhoea, and mild insomnia. Often these happen for the first few weeks; they may persist for some people. If there is a change in a person's behaviour or wellbeing – for example, if they develop a rash, start vomiting, lose their appetite, or have diarrhoea – it is important to discuss with a health professional, as it may be related to medication.

## LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY

Recently developed medications have few known long-term effects. Some of the earlier medications, however, had serious side effects. Some of the more common of these are liver damage, loss of bone density, high blood sugar, increased fat levels in the blood, and fat redistribution. Lipodystrophy is noticeable because deposits of fat can build up in different parts of the body, especially the belly, breasts, and back of the neck. Regular consultations with a health professional can help monitor any potential effects and keep them under control.

## MANAGING MEDICINE

Managing medicine may be difficult for a range of reasons: a person might have mental health or memory issues; they might have multiple conditions that require medications. It is important to take prescribed medications properly to help maintain health and wellbeing. It can be helpful to develop a strategy around taking medication to improve adherence. The strategy should be designed around what works for a particular person.

See the *Positive Caring* handbook for additional information on managing medicine.

## WHAT MEDICINES MIGHT A PERSON WITH HIV BE TAKING BESIDES ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY?

Like anybody else, an older person living with HIV may be taking several different medications in addition to ART. Due to the increased potential for multiple conditions a person with HIV may have to manage a wider range of medications (see *Factsheet 5: HIV Ageing and Co-morbidities* for more information).

For more information, please see page 29 of the *Positive Caring* handbook under 'Managing Medicine.'

<http://www.livingpositivevictoria.org.au/speakers/senior-voices-project>