

TREATMENT AS PREVENTION

You may have heard the phrase ‘treatment as prevention’, in relation to HIV. This factsheet explains what treatment as prevention means, what it means to you and what it means for the community.

This factsheet is based on personal experiences and clinical expertise.

WHAT IS HIV TREATMENT AS PREVENTION?

‘Treatment as Prevention’ is a term used to describe the use of HIV treatments among people with HIV to lower the risk of transmitting HIV to others.

It is well known that your viral load can be a significant risk factor in the onward transmission of HIV.

Taking treatment can significantly decrease your viral load and the risk of transmitting HIV to others.

Treatment as prevention has proven to drastically reduce transmission of HIV from a mother to her baby during childbirth and reducing your ‘viral load’ (the amount of virus in your body) combined with condom use for anal and vaginal sex, means you can significantly reduce the risk of HIV transmission.

In 2011, a landmark study of heterosexual couples validated that HIV treatment had a profound HIV prevention benefit. With certain criteria present such as consistent adherence to treatments, providing a consistent undetectable viral load and no STIs present, results showed that the risk of sexually transmitting HIV to an uninfected partner was reduced by 96%. Acknowledging the differences between controlled conditions in a study and real life as well as differences

between vaginal sex and anal sex, research is currently being conducted with same sex male couples which may provide additional evidence that HIV treatment reduces HIV transmission through anal sex.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME

LIVING WITH HIV?

Getting an HIV test is the first step to identifying any HIV infection and is the first point for both treatment and prevention. By lowering the level of virus in your body early HIV treatment helps people with HIV live longer, healthier lives and can also **lower** (it does not eliminate) your chance of transmitting HIV to others.

As people living with HIV (PLHIV) we take treatment to improve our health by decreasing our 'viral load', thereby reducing the likelihood of developing an AIDS-related illnesses. Not everyone on treatment will achieve an undetectable viral load and the higher the viral load in your body the higher the risk of transmitting HIV and developing HIV related illnesses.

HIV treatments have improved significantly in the past few years with fewer tablets taken less often and far fewer side effects than ever before. There is a very large body of research showing clear benefits of being on treatments. However, some people do have side effects (most often for a short period of time when they first start treatment) and failing to take treatments exactly as prescribed can lead to drug resistance. We still do not know what the longer term (over the course of a lifetime) side effects of being on HIV treatment are, but we do know that in order to live a long and healthy life, all PLHIV will need to eventually go on HIV treatment.

As an HIV-positive person you have the right to decide whether or not to take treatment by weighing up the potential disadvantages and benefits for your own health.

IMPORTANT: if you are not confident in committing to taking your HIV treatment on a daily basis, think again about starting. Talk to others, including your GP as well as other PLHIV about strategies they use to make sure they take their treatments on time. Get support before you begin treatment and you will find it much easier to stick to whatever treatment combination you start.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE COMMUNITY?

As **HIV positive people** we have a pivotal role in HIV prevention. The choices we make can affect others. While living with HIV is something we learn to do it is not something we want others to have to live with.

If you **do not know your HIV status** take control, get tested and make the choice to protect your health and the health of others. Getting on HIV treatment is an eventual reality and research is showing consistently that treatments enable people with HIV to stay healthy. There are people, organisations and resources that exist to help you make the right decisions when you are ready.

HIV negative people also have a role in HIV prevention. Never make assumptions about your own HIV status. If you have unprotected sex with others make sure you get regular tests, otherwise let people know that you **do not know your HIV status**. Engaging in unprotected sex without testing regularly means you **can't assume** you are HIV negative.

FINAL THOUGHTS...

To realise the full prevention benefit of treating HIV infection, the following should be kept in mind:

1. Reducing your viral load with treatment and regular use of condoms are the best options for preventing HIV transmission.
2. HIV testing is the foundation for both prevention and care efforts. If you do not know your HIV status get tested to help you make your treatment decisions.
3. Early identification of infection means you can take action that benefits both your own health and the health of others.
4. If you are HIV negative, consider regular testing so you can make informed decisions about your sexual practices.
5. Early treatment substantially reduces your risk of transmitting HIV to others.
6. HIV treatment as prevention can only work when you make sure you commit to ongoing HIV care. This includes daily adherence to your HIV therapy as well as looking after your sexual health care with regular STI checks.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

<http://www.livingpositivevictoria.org.au/living-with-HIV/resources>

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/tap/index.html>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bhiva-and-eaga-position-statement-on-the-use-of-antiretroviral-therapy-to-reduce-hiv-transmission>

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe1213734>

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