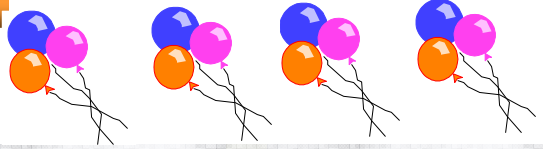


ODC NEWS & VIEWS

JULY 2009



Should I start antiretroviral medicines for HIV infection even though I have no symptoms?

Introduction

This information will help you understand your choices, whether you share in the decision-making process or rely on your doctor's recommendation.

Key points in making your decision

Treatment of **HIV infection without symptoms (asymptomatic)** with three or more antiretroviral medicines (combination therapy, or highly active antiretroviral therapy [HAART]) is based on:¹

Your general health.

Your [CD4+ counts](#).

Your willingness and ability to take your medicines as prescribed. Following your antiretroviral therapy schedule is essential for successful treatment of your HIV infection.

Treatment guidelines suggest the following for people with HIV:¹

When considering treatment, experts currently consider your CD4+ cell count and the presence or absence of symptoms much more important than your viral load.

If your [CD4+ cell count](#) is below 350 cells per micro liter (mcL), you should begin treatment to stabilize and increase your CD4+ cell count.

If your CD4+ cell count is more than 350 cells per micro liter, treatment may be offered to help keep your [immune system](#) healthy and prevent AIDS.

If treatment is not started,

your condition will be monitored with frequent CD4+ cell counts.

If you have symptoms of HIV or AIDS, you should consider starting treatment, whatever your CD4+ cell count is.

If you are pregnant, you should be treated to prevent your unborn baby ([fetus](#)) from becoming infected with HIV.

If you also have [hepatitis B](#) and are starting treatment for it, you should begin treatment for HIV as well.

with HIV when injecting drugs.

You have an increased risk of developing HIV through sexual contact if you:

Have unprotected sex (do not use condoms).

Have multiple sex partners.

Are a man who has sex with men.

Have high-risk partner(s) (a man or woman who has multiple sex partners or injects drugs, or a man who has sex with men).

Have or have recently had a [sexually transmitted disease](#), such as [syphilis](#) or [genital herpes](#).

People who are also at increased risk of developing HIV infection include:

Those who inject drugs or steroids, especially if they share needles, syringes, cookers, or other equipment used to inject drugs.

Babies born to women who are infected with HIV.

Medical Information What is human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)?

[HIV](#) is a virus that attacks and gradually weakens your [immune system](#). HIV infects CD4+ cells, a type of [white blood cell](#). As HIV-infected CD4+ cells are destroyed or impaired, the immune system becomes less able to fight infection and disease. HIV infection can progress to AIDS.

What increases my risk for HIV?

Most people get HIV by having unprotected sex with someone who has HIV. Another common way of getting the virus is by sharing needles with someone infected

What are antiretroviral medicines?

Antiretroviral medicines are used to slow the rate at which HIV makes copies of itself (replicates) in the body.

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What is HIV? What is AIDS?

Infected with HIV, you will probably need a blood test to confirm the results. If you have been exposed to HIV, your immune system will make antibodies to try to destroy the virus. Blood tests can find these antibodies in your blood.

Most doctors use two blood tests, called the ELISA and the Western blot assay. If the first ELISA is positive (meaning that HIV antibodies are found), the blood sample is tested again. If the second test is positive, the doctor will do a Western blot to be sure.

It may take as long as 6 months for HIV antibodies to show up in a blood sample. If you think you have been exposed to HIV but you test negative for it:

Get tested again in 6 months to be sure you are not infected.

Meanwhile, take steps to prevent the spread of the virus. If you are infected, you can still pass HIV to another person during this time.

Some people are afraid to be tested for HIV. But if there is any chance you could be infected, it is very important to find out. HIV can be treated. Getting early treatment can slow down the virus and help you stay healthy. And you need to know if you are infected so you can prevent spreading the infection to other people.

You can get HIV testing in most doctors' offices, public health clinics, hospitals, and Planned Parenthood clinics. You can also buy a home HIV test kit in a drugstore or by mail order. But be very careful to choose

only a test that has been approved by the FDA. If a home test is positive, see a doctor to have the result confirmed and to find out what to do next.

How is it treated?

The standard treatment for HIV is a combination of medicines called highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART). Antiretroviral medicines slow the rate at which the virus multiplies. Taking these medicines can reduce the amount of virus in your body and help you stay healthy.

It may not be easy to decide the best time to start treatment. There are pros and cons to taking HAART before you have symptoms. Discuss these with your doctor so you understand your choices.

To monitor the HIV infection and its effect on your immune system, a doctor will do two tests:

Viral load, which shows the amount of virus in your blood.

CD4+ cell count, which shows how well your immune system is working.

If you have no symptoms and your CD4+ cell count is at a healthy level, you may not need treatment yet. Your doctor will repeat the tests on a regular basis to see how you are doing. If you have symptoms, you should consider starting treatment, whatever your CD4+ count is.

After you start treatment, it is important to take your medicines exactly as directed by your doctor. When treatment doesn't work, it is

often because HIV has become [resistant](#) to the medicine. This can happen if you don't take your medicines correctly. Ask your doctor if you have questions about your treatment.

Treatment has become much easier to follow over the past few years. New combination medicines include two or three different medicines in one pill. Many people with HIV get the treatment they need by taking just one or two pills a day.

To stay as healthy as possible during treatment:

Don't smoke. People with HIV are more likely to have a [heart attack](#) or get lung cancer.¹² Smoking can increase these risks even more.



Eat a healthy, balanced diet to keep your immune system strong.

Get regular exercise to reduce stress and improve the quality of your life.

Don't use illegal drugs, and limit your use of alcohol.

Learn all you can about HIV so you can take an active role in your treatment. Your doctor can help you understand HIV and how best to treat it. Also, consider joining an HIV support group. Support groups can be a great place to share information and emotions about HIV infection.

How can you prevent HIV?

HIV can be spread by people who don't know they are infected. To protect yourself and others:

Practice safe sex. Use a condom every time you have sex (including oral sex) until you are sure you and your partner are not infected with HIV.

Don't have more than one sex partner at a time. The safest sex is with one partner who has sex only with you.

Talk to your partner before you have sex the first time. Find out if he or she is at risk for HIV. Get tested together and retested 6 months later. Use condoms in the meantime.

Don't drink a lot of alcohol or use illegal drugs before sex. You might let down your guard and not practice safe sex.

Don't share personal items, such as toothbrushes or razors.

Never share needles or syringes with anyone.

Frequently Asked Questions

Learning about HIV:

[What is human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\) infection?](#)

[What causes HIV?](#)

[What is acquired immunodeficiency syndrome \(AIDS\)?](#)

[What are the symptoms of HIV?](#)

[Can I prevent HIV?](#)

[What increases my risk for developing HIV?](#)

[Who is affected by HIV and AIDS?](#)

[Can a test find HIV infection early?](#)

Being diagnosed:

[How is HIV diagnosed?](#)

[Who can diagnose HIV?](#)

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Should I start antiretroviral medicines for HIV infection even though I have no symptoms?

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A combination of 3 or more antiretroviral medicines called [highly active antiretroviral therapy \(HAART\)](#) is the standard treatment for HIV infection. It is more effective than using just one medicine

This treatment approach offers the best chance of preventing HIV from multiplying and allowing your immune system to stay healthy. (monotherapy) in the treatment of HIV.

How effective are antiretroviral medicines?

The goal of antiretroviral therapy is to reduce the amount of virus in your body ([viral load](#)) to a level that is low enough that it can no longer be detected by laboratory tests.

The use of 3 or more antiretroviral medicines (HAART) does not cure HIV infection. But people who are treated with HAART:

Avoid developing AIDS, or recover from the symptoms of AIDS and enjoy a return to better health.

Have fewer [opportunistic infections](#) that are more common in people who have weakened immune systems, such as certain types of [pneumonia](#).

Experience significant drops in their viral loads, often to the point that the virus can no longer be detected in their blood with currently available tests. This is the goal of treatment.

Have a stable or slowly increasing CD4+ cell count.

From 1995 to 1996, the numbers of Americans who developed opportunistic infections or who died from

AIDS declined for the first time in the history of the epidemic. In 1996, the widespread use of HAART began. Experts believe that the use of HAART is mostly responsible for the continuing decline of deaths from AIDS.²

What are the benefits of starting antiretroviral medicines before symptoms of HIV develop?

The advantages of beginning treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) before HIV-related symptoms develop include:¹ Increased ability to achieve and maintain control of viral replication.

Delay or prevention of the weakening of the immune system. The risk of opportunistic infections—such as cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection, *Mycobacterium avium* complex ([MAC](#)), *Pneumocystis* [pneumonia](#), [cryptosporidiosis](#), and AIDS [dementia](#)—decreases.

Slower progression of HIV to AIDS.

Lower risk of [resistance](#) to the medicines, if viral suppression is complete.

Possibly lowered risk of HIV transmission.

Note:

Even with early therapy, the risk of HIV transmission still exists. Antiretroviral therapy cannot substitute for prevention measures, such as use of condoms and [safe sex practices](#).

An increase in life expectancy.³



What are the risks of starting antiretroviral medicines before symptoms of HIV develop?

Not all the risks of starting antiretroviral therapy before HIV-related symptoms develop are known. The disadvantages of beginning treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) before HIV-related symptoms develop include:¹

Greater chance of serious medicine-related problems and [side effects](#).

Earlier development of resistance to the medicines if viral suppression is not complete.

Limitation of future antiretroviral treatment options.

Cost of medicines, which may cause a financial hardship.

What are the benefits of waiting until symptoms of HIV develop before starting antiretroviral medicines?

The advantages of delaying treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) until HIV-related symptoms or AIDS develops include:¹

Avoiding serious medicine-related problems and [side effects](#).

Delaying development of resistance to the medicines.

Preserving the maximum number of antiretroviral medicine options when HIV disease risk is highest.

Saving money by not having to buy expensive anti-HIV medicines.

What are the risks of waiting until symptoms of HIV develop before starting antiretroviral medicines?

The possible disadvantages of delaying treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) until HIV-related symptoms or AIDS develops include an increased risk of:¹

Illness or death due to a weakened immune system.

Not controlling the amount of virus in your blood.

Spreading HIV to others.

For more information, see the topic [Human Immunodeficiency Virus \(HIV\) Infection](#).

Your Information

Your choices are:

Start treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) before HIV-related symptoms develop.

Delay treatment with antiretroviral medicines (HAART) until HIV-related symptoms or AIDS develops.

The decision about whether to start antiretroviral medicines (HAART) takes into account your personal feelings and the medical facts.

Deciding about antiretroviral medicines

Reasons to take antiretroviral medicines

Delays or prevents weakening of the [immune system](#)

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Should I start antiretroviral medicines for HIV infection even though I have no symptoms?

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Slows or prevents progression of HIV to AIDS

Lowers risk of **resistance** to the medicines, if viral suppression is complete

May decrease the risk of HIV transmission

Are there other reasons you might want to take antiretroviral medicines?

Reasons not to take antiretroviral medicines

Avoids negative effects on quality of life, such as the cost of medicines

Avoids serious problems and **side effects** related to medicines such as nausea, diarrhea, or abdominal pain

Delays development of **resistance** to the medicines

Preserves the maximum number of antiretroviral

medicine options when HIV disease risk is highest

Avoids unknown problems (not all the risks of starting antiretroviral therapy before HIV-related symptoms develop are known)

Are there other reasons you might not want to take antiretroviral medicines?

These **personal stories** may help you make your decision.

Wise Health Decision

Use this worksheet to help make your decision. After completing it, you should have a better idea of how you feel about starting antiretroviral medicines (HAART). Discuss the worksheet with your health professional.

Circle the answer that best applies to you.

My CD4+ cell count is more than 350 per micro liter (mcL).	Yes	No	Unsure
I am prepared to take my medicine exactly as prescribed.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am willing to take medicine every day even though I do not have symptoms.	Yes	No	Unsure
The benefits of taking medicines every day are greater than the inconvenience.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am willing to work with my health professional to figure out the best treatment for my condition.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am concerned about future resistance to the medicines.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am prepared to deal with possible side effects of the medicines.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am willing to follow up with my health professional to determine whether my antiretroviral medicines are working.	Yes	No	Unsure
I am concerned about my ability to pay for antiretroviral medicines.	Yes	No	Unsure
If I decide to start antiretroviral medicines, I have the support of my partner or family.	Yes	No	Unsure

What is your overall impression?

Your answers in the above worksheet are meant to give you a general idea of where you stand on this decision. You may have one overriding reason to start or not start antiretroviral medicines (HAART).

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antiretroviral agents in HIV-1-infected adults and adolescents. Adult and Adolescent Guidelines. Available online: <http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov/guidelines/GuidelineDetail.aspx?MenuItem=Guidelines&Search=Off&GuidelineID=7&ClassID=1>.

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Hypersensitivity

by David Pieribone

Allergies or sensitivities to things like pollen, strawberries, shellfish, and latex are quite common. Some people are allergic or sensitive to certain drugs or medications. In rare cases allergies can be quite serious, and sometimes fatal. When someone reacts to a drug in an exaggerated or abnormal way, they are said to be hypersensitive.

Certain anti-HIV medications can cause allergic reactions that are very serious and possibly life-threatening. These drugs include Ziagen, Viramune, and (to a lesser

extent) Rescriptor and Sustiva. Bactrim, a drug used to treat and prevent pneumonia in people with AIDS, can also cause a serious allergic reaction. A severe hypersensitivity reaction can happen when first starting a medication or many days or weeks after the medication is in use.

If you are taking one of the medications mentioned above and you experience a rash, especially with nausea and fever, and other flu-like symptoms that may include abdominal pain, vomiting and muscle/joint pain, you should contact your healthcare provider immediately or go to the nearest emergency

room. You should not re-start these medications

unless your healthcare provider tells you that you can.

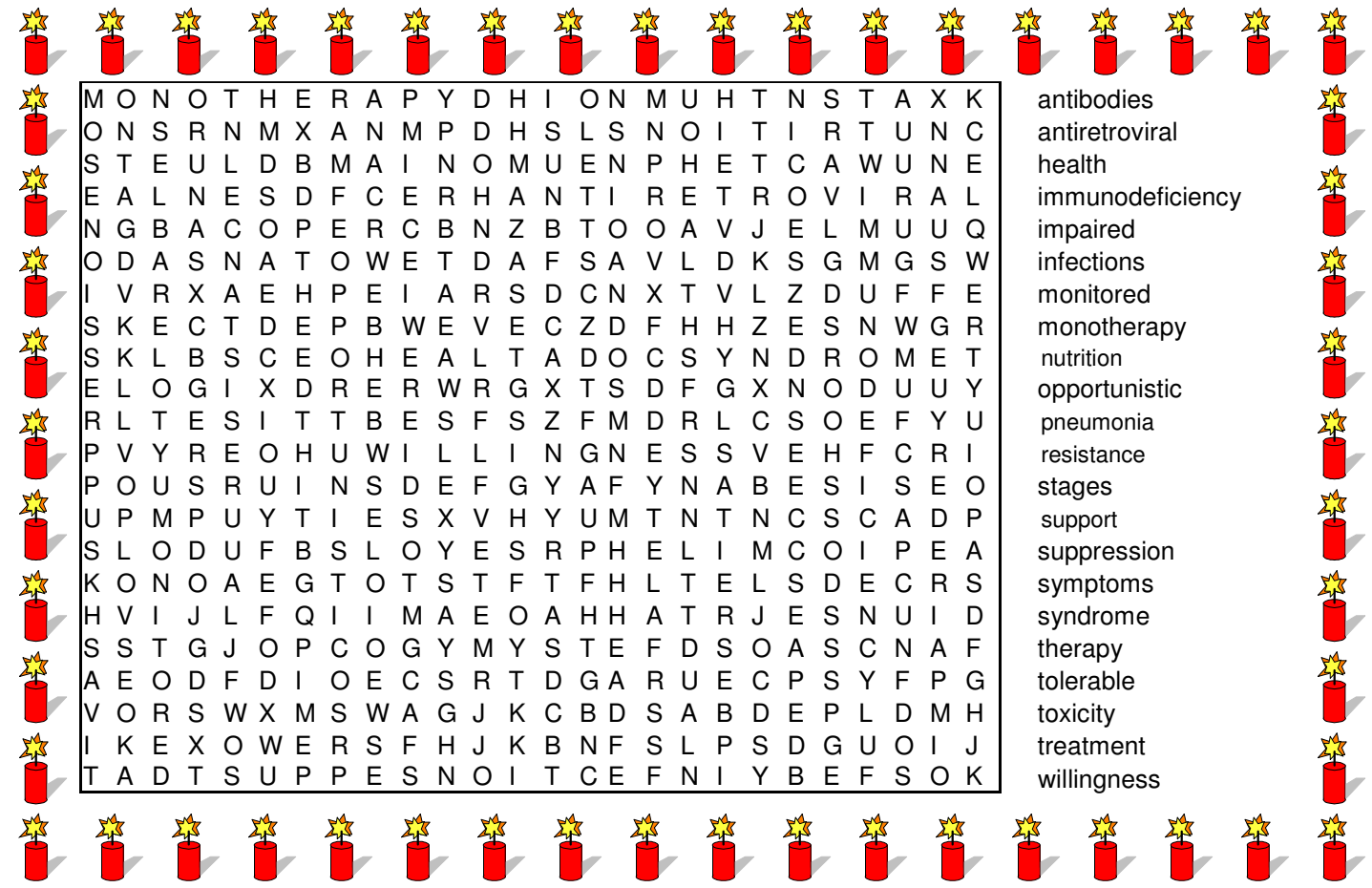
Ziagen should never be re-started once it is stopped since this can cause serious complications that can be fatal.

While only a handful of people experience a hypersensitivity reaction, it is important to report any symptoms to your healthcare provider— just in case.

David Pieribone is the Associate Director of Education at AIDS Project Los Angeles.

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While only a handful of people experience a hypersensitivity reaction....



MONOTHERAPYDHIONMUNHTNSTAXK
 ONSRNMXPANMPDHSLSNOITIRTUNC
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 EALNESDFCERHANTIRETROVIRAL
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 IVRXAEHPEIARSDCNXTVLZDUFFE
 SKECTDEPBWEVECEZDFHHZESNWGR
 SKLBSCEOHEALTA DOCSYNDROMET
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 RLTESITTBESFSZFM DRLCSOEFYU
 PVYREOHUWILLINGNESVEHFCRI
 POUSRUINSDEFGYAFYNABESISEO
 UPMPUYTIESXVHYUMTNTNCSCADP
 SLODUFBSLOYESRPHELIMCOIPEA
 KONOAEGTOTSTFTFHLTELSDEC RS
 HVIJL FQIIMAE OAHHATRJESNUID
 SSTGJOPCOGYMYSTEFDSOASCNAF
 AEODFDIOEC SRTD GARUECP SYFP G
 VORSWXMSWAGJKCBDSABDEPLDMH
 IKEXOWERSFHJKBNFSLPSDGUOIJ
 TADTSUPPESNOITCEFNIBEF SOK

- antibodies
- antiretroviral
- health
- immunodeficiency
- impaired
- infections
- monitored
- monotherapy
- nutrition
- opportunistic
- pneumonia
- resistance
- stages
- support
- suppression
- symptoms
- syndrome
- therapy
- tolerable
- toxicity
- treatment
- willingness

TOXICITY

By David Pieribone

Toxicity refers to harmful effects of a drug that occur when it is taken. Many times toxicities are described as side effects. Almost all drugs are known to cause toxicities.

But, they vary from person to person; what is mild in one person can be serious in another. Things like age, weight, gender (male/female), and overall health can influence how bad toxicities will be and how long they will last.

Not all toxicities are dangerous. Some are short term and occur soon after starting a new medication. These may go away by themselves or with minor treatment. Others last as long as you take a particular drug, but are tolerable and outweighed by the benefit you are getting from that

medication. Many toxicities will go away if the drug is stopped or the dosage decreased.

Some toxicities are more serious. They might not even make you feel ill, but could be very dangerous--such as the beginning stages of liver damage. It is important for you and your doctor to monitor your health carefully and to have regular laboratory tests to detect any possible problems.

Much of what we know about a drug's toxicities comes from studies con-

ducted prior to its approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, long-term toxicities may not be spotted right away. Doctors are still learning about some drugs, especially new ones. If you think you are experiencing toxicity, notify your doctor right away. You should not, however, stop or change the doses of any of your drugs without first talking to your doctor.

David Pieribone is the Associate Director of Education at AIDS Project Los Angeles

JULY EVENTS



- 01-Support Group (E) 5-8p
- 04- HAPPY 4TH OF JULY
- 06- Nutrition Group (E)
- 10- Support Group (A) 4-6p
- 13- Nutrition Group (A)
- 15- Gilead Lunch (E) 12p
- 15- Newsletter Deadline
- 20- Staff Meeting (E)
- 20- Nutrition Group (E)
- 23- Bingo (E)
- 24- Support Group (A) 4-6p
- 27- Nutrition Group (A)

(A) Aurora (E) Elgin
(LA) Love & Action

Dates are subject to change

Please call to verify dates

What is HIV? What is AIDS?

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Getting treatment:

[What is highly active antiretroviral therapy \(HAART\)?](#)
[Should I start antiretroviral medicines for HIV infection even though I have no symptoms?](#)

Living with HIV:

[What steps can I take to maintain my health?](#)
[When should I call a doctor?](#)
[How can I learn to take antiretroviral therapy for HIV on schedule?](#)
[What do I need to know](#)

[about caring for my loved one with HIV?](#)

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