

SUPPORT & TREATMENT

If you are HIV positive, what do you do?



Some people have a 'buddy' or designated family member who reminds them about taking their tablets on time, consistently. This helps because there may be times you don't remember or don't feel like taking them and need assistance and moral support

TREATMENT CENTRES

Name	Address	Telephone	Region
Suddie Hospital	Suddie, Essequibo Coast	774 4227	2
West Demerara Hospital	Vreed en Hoop WCD	254 0311/0313	3
GPHC - Gum Clinic	GPHC Compound	226 0664	4
St Joseph Mercy Hospital	130-132 Parade St., Georgetown	227 2072/5	4
New Amsterdam Hospital	New Amsterdam, Berbice	333 6614	6
Skeldon Hospital	Skeldon, Corriverton, Corentyne Berbice	339 2211	6
Bartica Hospital	2 nd Ave, Bartica	455 2339	7
Linden Hospital	Limine Office Complex, Casuarina Drive McKenzie	444 6693	10

While there is no cure for HIV/AIDS there is treatment that can slow down the infection and keep you healthy for a very long time. Like diabetes and heart disease which also have no cure, HIV can be managed with ongoing treatment and medication. The earlier you are diagnosed with HIV, the sooner you can begin treatment and get the care that will help you get on with your life.

**Treatment is FREE in Guyana.
Go to a clinic and get the help you need.**

What are possible negative side affects?

The medications affect people differently. Some people experience nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, abnormal fat distribution, nerve problems, skin rashes, fatigue, headache, anemia, high cholesterol, liver problems, fever or kidney stones. If you experience any symptoms, contact your doctor immediately.

What is an opportunistic infection?

Opportunistic infections are those diseases that take advantage of your weakened immune system to attack your body. These diseases include TB, pneumonia and fungus infections. When you are HIV positive, any sickness that you get should be attended to by a doctor as soon as possible. If left untreated, opportunistic infections can be fatal.

Are there drugs for children?

Yes. There are medications made especially for children. They are available at treatment clinics.

Besides medication, what other care and treatment are available?

Home-based care is available for people who are very sick. Nurses and volunteers can visit you at home. To learn more about it, talk to your doctor or contact a treatment center.

What does the HIV virus do?

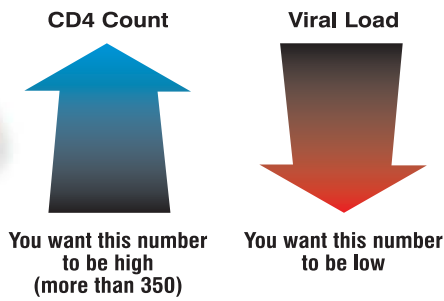
The HIV virus attacks the body's immune system. The immune system fights germs and keeps you healthy. T-cells are the white blood cells which are the 'soldiers' of your immune system. They recognize germs and work with other cells to destroy them.

The HIV virus infects the body's T-cells. It is able to enter the T-cells and turn them into "factories" that can produce thousands of HIV viruses. Your immune system then attacks and kills infected T-cells. When T-cells are killed, they are replaced by healthy T-cells but not as quickly as they are infected and killed. Fighting the infected T-cells eventually drains your immune system because there aren't enough healthy T-cells to do their job of fighting germs.



What are the goals of HIV Treatment?

1. Increase your body's ability to fight infection by keeping your immune system healthy and effective.
2. Decrease the amount of HIV in your body (your viral load) and keep it low as long as possible.
3. Minimize the side effects and drug interactions.



How do I know how healthy my immune system is?

One way to determine the damage HIV has done to your immune system is to measure the T-cells with a CD4 count. Another test checks for the amount of HIV virus in your blood. This is called your viral load.

How is a CD4 count tested?

This is done by taking a blood test. Normally your CD4 count is between 500 and 1,500. When you are infected with HIV and your CD4 count falls below 350, antiretroviral drugs are recommended.



How is the viral load tested?

This is also done with a blood test.

What do I do if my CD4 cell count stays above 350?

In the early stages of HIV infection, it is necessary to maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritious foods and exercising. Keeping your CD4 cell count above 350 without medication, for as long as possible, is very important.

"It's important to be positive about being HIV positive."

What is a healthy lifestyle?

- Practicing safe sex.
- Being good to your immune system by eating healthy foods, getting rest and exercise and avoiding drugs and alcohol.
- Taking your medication just as a doctor prescribed it.

"It is important to avoid everything that weakens your immune system and speeds up the progression of HIV to AIDS."

If anti-virus medications can help me stay healthy, why wait to start treatment?

Once you start treatment, you must continue for the rest of your life. Sometimes there are side effects which have to be managed. In some cases the drugs aren't effective and stronger drugs need to be prescribed. It is best to keep yourself healthy so you can wait as long as possible to start taking medication.

Why is safe sex important?

No matter what stage you are in or what medication you are taking, you can still infect others and re-infect yourself. If you re-infect yourself you are likely to increase your viral load.

It is possible in committed relationships, when one partner is infected, to keep the other partner HIV negative when safe sex is practiced.

What do I do if my CD4 count falls below 350?

Consult your doctor for advice about antiretroviral treatment.

What are Antiretroviral Drugs?

A variety of drugs are available which can slow down the spread of HIV disease in your body by reducing the rate at which it reproduces. The drugs are taken as capsules for adults and in liquid form for children. A combination of four types is usually prescribed.

There are four classes of antiretroviral medications your doctor will tell you about:

1. NRTIs - Nucleoside Reverse Transcriptase Inhibitors.
2. NNRTIs - Nonnucleoside Reverse Transcriptase Inhibitors.
3. PIs - Protease Inhibitors.
4. Fusion inhibitors

What do Anti-retroviral Drugs do?

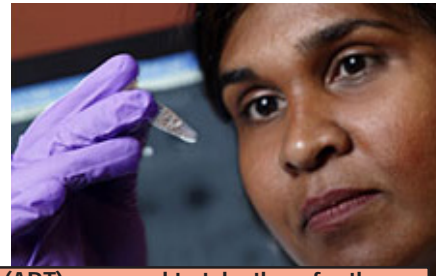
Unfortunately, the drugs do not cure HIV but they do slow down the progression of HIV to AIDS. Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) reduces the HIV viral load as much as possible, sometimes to undetectable levels, for as long as possible. This results in less damage to your immune system and delays the development of AIDS.

An undetected viral load means that it is so low it can not be detected with the kinds of blood tests that are available today. It does not mean that there is no more HIV in your body so don't be tempted to stop taking the medication. If you do, your viral load will rise again and you may face a rapid decline in your health.

How do I know when to start the medication?

Your doctor will prescribe medication based on these factors:

- you have symptoms of advanced HIV.
- your CD4 count falls below 350.
- your viral load (if test is available) is 100,000 copies or more.



Once you start the medication (ART) you need to take them for the rest of your life. HIV should be regarded as a chronic illness, just like diabetes or high blood pressure and requires ongoing treatment.

How many medications will I need to take?

The recommended treatment for HIV is a combination of three or more medications in pill form. This treatment is called Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART).

What treatment is right for me?

In the national Treatment and Care Guidelines for Guyana, there are various HAART regimens. The decision on which one to use should be discussed with your doctor. The following considerations will be taken into account:

- number of pills to be taken
- how often pills are taken
- pills taken with or without food
- interactions with other medications
- other diseases you may have
- pregnancy



Why is it so important to take medication on time, every day?

It is critical to follow your doctor's instructions and take all your medication at the required times. This is called adherence.

Adherence is how closely you follow your doctor's instructions for taking your medication. When you skip your medication, even once, the virus has an opportunity to reproduce more easily and it can cause treatment failure. You may develop strains of HIV that are resistant to the drugs you are taking and sometimes even to drugs you haven't yet taken. This could leave you with fewer treatment options if you need to change your treatment regimen in the future.

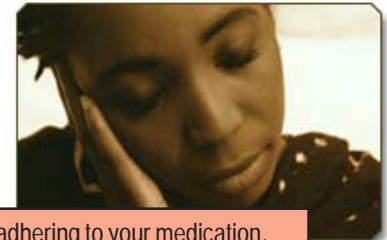
When you take your drugs on time, and in the amounts prescribed, it helps decrease the amount of HIV in your blood and helps prevent drug resistance.

Why is it difficult for some people to adhere?

The treatment regimens for HIV patients can be complicated. Most of them involve taking several pills at different times each day. Some have to be taken several times a day, some have to be taken on an empty stomach, while others have to be taken with food. Remembering these instructions can be difficult, especially if you are sick.

Some other reasons include:

- Experiencing unpleasant side effects (such as vomiting).
- Being asleep during dose times.
- Being away from home without having medication
- Being too busy
- Forgetting



If you have problems adhering to your medication, get advice from your doctor or social worker.

What can help me adhere to my treatment?

It is important to discuss your habits and lifestyle with your doctor so a regimen can be prescribed that works best for you. These are some practical tips that can help you adhere to your treatment:

- Take your medications at the same time each day.
- Use timers, alarm clocks or pagers to remind you about medication times.
- Keep your medication accessible. Keep supplies in your bag or purse.
- Keep a medication diary so you can keep track of your doses and tick them off as you take them.
- Make plans for weekends, holidays and changes in your routine.
- Solicit the support of family and friends so they can give you gentle reminders to take your medication.
- Visit your doctor before your supply runs out.

