



Your **2017** guide to

Living well with HIV and AIDS



What I need to know about **HIV and AIDS**

WHAT IS HIV/AIDS?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that can slowly wear down the immune system. The immune system is a human body's natural defence against infections and diseases. Opportunistic infections tend to develop when the HI virus weakens your immune system. It can make you very ill and cause Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) when the immune system has become too weakened.

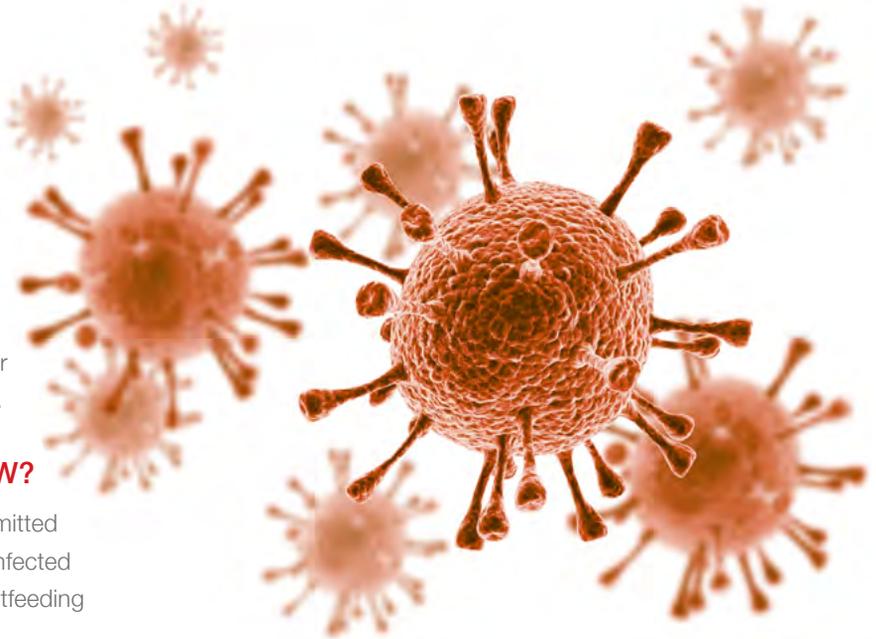
HOW DOES HIV AFFECT THE BODY?

The role of the immune system is to defend our body from germs. The CD4 cell is a type of white blood cell, which is an important part of the immune system. These cells protect our body from germs, which helps us to deal with most infections. As the HI virus multiplies, it destroys the CD4 cells. The CD4 count decreases and the body's immune system weakens. With a damaged immune system, the person living with HIV becomes even more vulnerable to different illnesses and infections. In a healthy person the normal CD4 cell count is between 500 and 1500 cells in each millilitre of blood. The CD4 count is usually reported as per cubic millimetre (/mm³).

Treatment can be started at any time that the person test positive provided they are ready. The doctor will do a viral load test along with a CD4 count to get a more accurate picture of the disease stage and to monitor the disease. Viral load is a measure of the amount of HIV in the blood. If the viral load is low or undetectable, it means that the disease is not far advanced, or that the antiretroviral treatment (ART) is working.

WHO CAN CONTRACT HIV AND HOW?

Anyone can contract HIV. It is mainly transmitted through exposure to body fluids from an infected person. It can also be transmitted from breastfeeding mothers to their babies.



FACTORS, BEHAVIOURS AND CONDITIONS THAT PUT INDIVIDUALS AT GREATER RISK OF CONTRACTING HIV INCLUDE:

- Having sex with a partner whose HIV status is unknown.
- Unprotected sex (no condom).
- Multiple and simultaneous sexual partnerships.
- Untreated sexually transmitted infections.
- Men who are not circumcised.
- Injecting drugs with contaminated needles and syringes.
- Accidental needle stick injuries at work, particularly among healthcare workers.
- A baby of an HIV-positive mother who is not on effective treatment.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM INFECTED WITH HIV?

In the early stages of infection, HIV often causes no symptoms and the infection can be diagnosed ONLY by testing a person's blood.

Antibody tests such as rapid tests and ELISA tests are available to diagnose HIV infection. These tests detect the presence of antibodies to HIV produced by the body in response to HIV infection.

It takes 15 days to three weeks for the body to produce antibodies. During this time, an antibody test may give a “false negative” result, which means that the test is negative even though the person is actually infected with HIV.

The only way to be sure you are HIV negative is to have an HIV test done three months after the last time you had a sexual encounter that was risky (i.e. sex without condom use or not knowing your partner's HIV status). For example, where an individual had an unprotected sexual relationship on 1 January, only a negative test done after April can confirm whether HIV was transmitted.

While an HIV test may be negative during the window period, people who have been infected with HIV are highly contagious at this time; they can pass the virus more easily to others.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF FROM HIV?

You can reduce your risk of HIV infection by limiting exposure to risk factors. You can limit your exposure to HIV through the following:

- Abstain from sex and wait until you are ready.
- Be faithful to one partner.
- Reduce the number of sexual partners.
- Always use a condom during sexual intercourse.
- Screen for and treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as they enhance the risk of HIV transmission through genital ulcers or infections.
- Prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission by providing both the mother and the baby with antiretroviral drugs.
- To prevent mother-to-child transmission, discuss your breastfeeding options with your doctor.
- Take emergency HIV pills, called post-exposure prophylaxis, when you believe you may have been exposed to the virus within the last 72 hours. This significantly reduces the risk of being infected.
- Undergo safe male circumcision performed by a trained health professional.
- Use sterile injecting equipment including needles and syringes if injections are needed for medical reasons, for example insulin injections for diabetics.
- Avoid drug and alcohol abuse as these are known to increase risky behaviour.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR HIV?

There is no cure or vaccine for HIV infection, but there are effective treatments using antiretroviral treatment (ART). They prevent the virus from multiplying which allows the body to restore and strengthen its immune system. When taken properly, these drugs can improve general health, quality of life and increase life expectancy.

In general, individuals are given a fixed-dose combination (FDC) of three medicines. FDC is a combination of three different antiretroviral medicines. They are combined together as one pill to make it easier for a patient to swallow. The treatment is adapted to suit the needs of each individual and prescribed by a doctor or family practitioner. HIV treatment is permanent and lifelong. It is effective if the person is committed and consistent in taking medicine on time and every day. Your doctor will monitor the efficacy of your treatment by assessing you every six months or more frequently if necessary.

Like most medicines, antiretroviral drugs can cause side effects. These unwanted effects are often mild, but sometimes they are more serious and can impact on health or on the quality of life of the individual. Side effects vary from person to person and it is impossible to predict how each individual will be affected. It is essential to report any side effects during your appointment with your doctor. Examples of side-effects include diarrhoea, nausea and/or vomiting, rash and Lipodystrophy (loss of body fat in ways that can often cause disfigurement).

Some opportunistic infections are preventable through drug therapy (such as antibiotics). This is known as prophylactic treatment. Your doctor will determine the need for prophylactic treatment.



I am living with HIV, what should I do?

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Being HIV positive is not a death sentence. With treatment, people living with HIV are expected to have a normal life. If you have the will and determination to live well, then your body will respond positively. If you take your medicine and live positively your quality of life will improve and you will live a longer, healthier and more productive life.

FIND A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Find friends, family members and/or counsellors who will be supportive to help you adjust and learn to live with HIV.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

The more you know about HIV, the better you can use the information to help you stay healthy and strong.

GO FOR REGULAR CHECK-UPS

- Do not wait until you become ill to go for a check-up. Regular check-ups can identify sicknesses that can be treated. It is advised that you see your doctor at least twice a year.
- Get your CD4 count and viral load tested regularly, as prescribed by your doctor.
- Get weighed regularly to ensure you are not losing weight.

REST AND RELAX

- The body needs extra rest. Try to sleep for eight hours every night. Rest whenever you are tired.
- Try not to worry too much. Stress can harm your immune system.
- Counselling is a great support if you are worrying or have problems.
- Relax with people you love, your family, children and friends.
- Do things you enjoy, e.g. listen to music or read a newspaper/book.

EAT WELL

- The food you eat is very important in determining the strength of your immune system and whether you stay healthy or not. "Eating well" means eating a range of different foods every day that help keep your body healthy.



A healthy diet should provide enough:

- Vitamins (found in fruits and vegetables).
- Minerals (found in foods such as pumpkin seeds, fish, nuts, spinach, fruits and others).

EXERCISE

You need to exercise regularly, at least three times a week, to help:

- Keep your mind healthy.
- Keep your body strong.
- Make you feel alive, happy and healthy.
- Make you sleep better.
- Improve your appetite.
- Relieve stress.

- Carbohydrates (found in grain and cereals).
- Proteins (found in meat/fish and other foods).

AVOID ALCOHOL, RECREATIONAL DRUGS AND SMOKING

Alcohol, recreational drugs and smoking can weaken your body by breaking down cells.

- Alcohol can make ART less effective, reduce your appetite and lead to risky behaviour. Avoid going to the places where you would usually drink.
- Avoid smoking because it increases the risk of illness and infections like pneumonia.
- Avoid using recreational drugs as they may weaken the immune system.

WHAT IS COMPLIANCE?

Compliance is the key element for treatment success.

- It means adhering to your treatment plan, not missing doctors' appointments, doing pathology tests as required (usually twice a year), taking all the prescribed medicine without forgetting to take a single dose. It also means being committed to a healthy lifestyle. The social stigma associated with HIV can result in non-compliance as some HIV-infected individuals are afraid to be rejected by their partner, family, colleagues or friends if they learn that they are HIV positive. They will not go to the clinic or fetch their medicine at the pharmacy because they fear that someone could disclose their status to other people they know.

TAKE YOUR ART EXACTLY AS PRESCRIBED

One problem with ART drugs is that if they are not taken as prescribed, the virus becomes resistant to the drug which will need to be changed. Taking your ART drugs every day at the right time and in the right way keeps the right levels of the medicines in the blood, which prevent the virus from becoming resistant to the medicines. Use your watch or cell phone alarms to help you remember to take your medicine.

NOTIFY YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU MISS TAKING YOUR MEDICINE

Missing your medicine can lead HIV to becoming resistant to ART.

- If you miss an ART dose on a rare occasion, it will usually not result in failure of the treatment.
- If you frequently miss or skip doses of your ART medicine the HIV may develop resistance to ARTs and the treatment will become ineffective.

TAKE ART PILLS WITH FOOD AND LIQUIDS

- Food can reduce nausea caused by some pills.
- Some pills are better absorbed when taken with food.
- Drinking liquids can prepare the stomach for pills and help one swallow them.
- Clean water, fresh juice, milk, tea, soup or rice water can be taken if you do not feel like having food.
- Exercise before eating (i.e. stretching or a short walk) to increase your appetite.

Take your treatment (ART) in company of friends or family if possible as it will provide you with the support necessary to take your medicine.

HOW DO I PROTECT OTHER PEOPLE FROM HIV?

What if my partner is HIV negative?

- Consistently practise safe sex using condoms.
- Take all your medicine, always on time to help lower the viral load (measurement of the amount of virus in blood) in your body fluids and decrease the chance of transmitting HIV to your partner.
- The recommendations for serodiscordant couples (one partner lives with HIV and the other one is HIV-negative) include offering ART to the HIV-positive partner as early as possible (discuss with your treating doctor).

Things you should do:

- Be responsible when having sex. Use condoms correctly and consistently. This is the safest way to avoid transmission of STIs and will help you to avoid contracting a different strain of HIV.
- *If you are pregnant -*
 - Use condoms every time you have sex, even if you and your partner are already living with HIV to avoid being re-infected.
 - Talk to your doctor and take antiretroviral drugs to reduce the risk of transmission of HIV to your baby, and discuss feeding options.
 - Inform the GEMS HIV Disease Management provider and register on the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme.
- *Tell your partner(s) that you are living with HIV as they will be provided with the opportunity to support you and can protect themselves.*
 - It can be difficult to tell your sexual partner(s), but they need to know so they can also get tested and seek the support they may need.
 - Tell your potential sexual partner so you can agree on practising safe sex.
 - If you are a man and had sex with a woman who became pregnant (even if you are not the father), you need to tell the woman so that she can get early medical care for her own and her baby's health.



Things you should NOT do if you are HIV-positive:

- Do not share needles for injecting drugs. Seek help if you inject drugs as you can better fight HIV if you are free from such addiction.
- Do not donate blood, plasma or organs.
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes. HIV can be spread through fresh blood on such items.

WHERE CAN I FIND HELP IN DEALING WITH HIV?

On the GEMS HIV/AIDS Disease Management Programme (DMP)

- Your information is kept confidential since the programme is managed by a team of health professionals separate from other Scheme programmes and your employer.
- Learn about the disease and choose the right doctor for you, one who makes you feel comfortable and encourages you to participate in your treatment plan.
- Receive all support and medicine you need.
- The main member and/or their dependants can register on the HIV/AIDS DMP.
- Please call **0860 436 736** or use our “please call me number” **083 843 67 64** from Monday to Friday between 8am and 5pm and Saturday from 8am to 12pm or email us at **hiv@gems.gov.za** for further information on the programme, to ask for an application form to enrol or for contact details of treating doctors in your area.
- Visit your treating doctor who must examine you and complete your application form. You will need to sign the application form and your doctor should submit it to GEMS by fax to the confidential toll-free fax number **0800 436 7329** or email to **hiv@gems.gov.za**.
- As soon as your application has been received and approved, you will be notified via your preferred method of communication (such as sms, post or email).
- You will then be able to access your medical care benefits where appropriate.

HOW DO I SEND A “PLEASE CALL ME”?

When using the Vodacom network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone ***140*0838436764#**
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

When using the MTN network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone ***121*0838436764#**
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

When using the Cell C network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone ***111*0838436764#**
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE HIV/AIDS DMP?

You will receive the support you need to lead a healthy and productive life and access the following benefits:

- Medicine to treat HIV/AIDS (antiretroviral therapy).
- Medicines to treat and prevent opportunistic infections including multivitamins where appropriate (a doctor's script and pre-authorisation is required for all medicines including multivitamins).
- Pathology tests (all blood tests related to monitoring and diagnosing your condition).
- Regular monitoring of your condition to ensure you start treatment at the right time, that your treatment is effective and that you are compliant.
- Clinical support and guidelines for your treating doctor.
- Access to a specially-trained medical team who will review your details and consult with your doctor to ensure that you receive the most appropriate treatment for your condition.
- Reminders to do regular check-ups and tests to monitor the state of your health and update your treatment where necessary.
- Treatment to prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child (including treatment for the baby).
- If you should accidentally expose any of your HIV-negative dependents or if you are HIV negative and you are exposed to infected bodily fluids. Treatment will be provided to prevent the transmission of the virus.



Contact details

GEMS HIV/AIDS DISEASE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Call: 0860 436 736

Please call me: 083 843 67 64

Email: hiv@gems.gov.za

www.gems.gov.za





YOUR 2017 GUIDE TO **LIVING WELL WITH HIV AND AIDS**

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Working towards a healthier you