Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

_Last updated: September 15, 2023_

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org
Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

• If you’re living with HIV, treatment with HIV drugs can improve your quality of life and help you stay healthier longer

• Starting treatment is a big decision
Preparing for HIV Treatment

• To get the most benefit from HIV drugs, they must be used exactly the way they are prescribed
• Taking your treatment correctly is as important as which drugs you and your health care provider choose
• Before getting started, be prepared!
  – The right health care provider
  – Enough knowledge about HIV
  – A positive attitude
The results of a study called **the START trial** have shown once and for all:

- **People living with HIV who start treatment early, while CD4 counts are still high, have a much lower risk of illness and death**
  - Including people living with HIV who feel well
- **Taking HIV drugs earlier reduced likelihood of developing AIDS-related *and* non-AIDS related illnesses**
Consensus Statement

• Scientific experts and policy makers came together in July 2015
  – Issued statement declaring all people living with HIV should have access to HIV treatment as soon as they’re diagnosed
Benefits of Starting Early

- A longer life
- Having a higher CD4 cell count and keeping it high
- Preventing further damage to the immune system
- Decreasing risk of HIV-related and non-HIV-related health problems
- Reducing risk of transmitting HIV to others (*Treatment as Prevention* or *TasP*)
- No risk of transmitting HIV to sexual partners if on treatment and undetectable viral load (*U=U*)

www.thewellproject.org
Risks of Starting Late

• A shorter life

• Severely weakened immune system
  – Can take longer to restore immune system to full strength
  – Can increase chances that people living with HIV will develop AIDS and other serious illnesses

• Greater chance of immune reconstitution syndrome
  – Can worsen infections when HIV drugs are started and CD4 count is low

• Passing HIV to others, including sexual partners and babies, if you become pregnant

www.thewellproject.org
Treatment Guidelines

- Issued by a variety of global and national agencies
  - Written and reviewed regularly by HIV experts

- Guidelines on starting HIV treatment:
  - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS): All people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count
  - World Health Organization and others: Since September 2015 also recommend all people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count
The Right Health Care Provider

• Ideally:
  – You and your provider work as a team
  – You can choose among providers
  – Neither of these may be true, though

• Are you and your provider a team? Ask yourself:
  – Can I be totally honest with them?
  – Are they available when I have questions?
  – Do they take my concerns seriously?

• If so, great!

www.thewellproject.org
The Right Health Care Provider

- Not feeling fully respected? Consider talking to your provider or finding another (if you are able to choose)
  - Being informed can help you with any provider
- Wise to have a provider who is an HIV specialist
- To find HIV specialists near you:
  - Ask for suggestions from friends and/or ASOs
  - American Academy of HIV Medicine (AAHIVM)
  - HIV Medical Association (HIVMA)
  - International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care (IAPAC)

www.thewellproject.org
Treatment Goals

• Get your viral load as low as possible for as long as possible
• Preserve, improve health of immune system by increasing the number of CD4 cells
• Improve quality of life and reduce illness
• Reduce risk of transmitting HIV to others
Adherence

Taking drugs on schedule, as prescribed

• To get best benefits from HIV therapy, good adherence is required

• HIV drugs need to be kept at a certain level in your body

• Skipping doses, not taking drugs on time, not following food requirements can cause drugs to be less effective or stop working
When a drug can longer fight HIV effectively

- If viral load goes up while taking HIV drugs, you should have a resistance test
- If your HIV develops resistance, you will likely have to change some drugs in your regimen

The best way to avoid resistance is to take your HIV drugs exactly as directed!
A Positive Attitude

When you think about starting treatment, it’s important to have a good attitude. May help to know that:

• Starting treatment is the right decision for you
• HIV drugs will help you fight the virus
• You can take your medications the right way
A Positive Attitude

- Think about why you’re starting treatment
  - To keep yourself in good health – for your own sake, and/or for the good of your family, friends, community
- You need not wait until your immune system is damaged before taking HIV drugs
- Newer HIV drugs are much easier on your body and have fewer side effects
A Positive Attitude

When you think about starting treatment, it’s important not to go it alone

- Put together a support system that may include:
  - Your health care provider
  - Social workers
  - Case managers
  - Family and/or friends
  - Support group of other people living with HIV
  - Online communities: The Well Project’s A Girl Like Me
• To learn more about this topic, please read the full fact sheet:
  – Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment
• For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  – www.thewellproject.org
  – www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  – www.twitter.com/thewellproject