Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

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

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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

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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**
The START Trial

• While experts long debated benefits/risks of starting HIV treatment while people are relatively healthy, START trial made it clear that **benefits of starting early outweigh any potential risks**

• 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

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Benefits of Starting Early

- Having a higher CD4 cell count and keeping it high
- Preventing further damage to the immune system
- Decreasing risk for HIV-related and non-HIV-related health problems
- Reducing risk of transmitting HIV to others (*Treatment as Prevention* or *TasP*)
- Eliminating risk of transmitting HIV to sexual partners if undetectable viral load and adherence to treatment (*Undetectable=Untransmittable* or *U=U*)
Risks of Starting Late

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

• Greater chance of immune reconstitution syndrome (IRIS)
  – 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

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HIV 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:** Recent guidelines issued in September 2015 also recommend all people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count
  – **As of October 2015:** All internationally-written guidelines in agreement

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You and your provider ought to decide together when to start treatment

Provider may consider:
- Baseline blood tests
- Readiness to start and stick to lifelong treatment

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!
• Not feeling fully respected? Consider talking to your provider or finding another (if you are able to choose)
  – Even if you have no choice of providers, being informed about HIV can help you in discussions with any provider

• Wise to have a health care provider who is an HIV specialist (treats many people living with HIV)

• 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)
Goals of HIV Treatment

• 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

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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 believe 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

• 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 friends
  – Support group of other people living with HIV
  – Online communities such as The Well Project’s *A Girl Like Me!*

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• 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