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# Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma

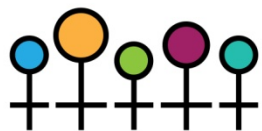
*Last updated: August 21, 2023*

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

#onewomanatatime

[www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)

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# What Is “U=U”?

When a person living with HIV is actively taking HIV drugs and their viral load has reached **undetectable** levels (< 200 copies/mL), that person **cannot transmit HIV to a sexual partner who is HIV-negative**

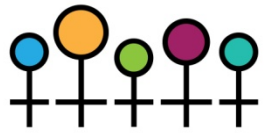
HIV community members, advocates, and experts refer to this as **“Undetectable Equals Untransmittable” (“U=U”)**



Get tested. Stay protected. Find out how at:  
[StartsWithMe.org.uk](https://StartsWithMe.org.uk)



Produced by Terence Higgins Trust for HIV PREVENTION ENGLAND.  
Terence Higgins Trust is a registered charity in England and Wales (reg. no. 288527) and in Scotland (SC039906). Company reg. no. 1276149.

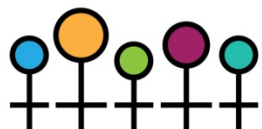


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# Treatment as Prevention (TasP)



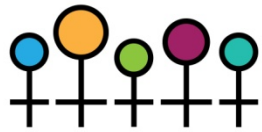
- Foundation of U=U
- Ways we can use HIV treatment regimens to ***lower risk of transmitting HIV***
- Mixed-status couples can safely conceive
  - TasP for partner living with HIV
  - PrEP for HIV-negative partner
- 1990s: discovery of using HIV drugs to prevent transmission during pregnancy
- 2011: HPTN 052 study
- 2016: Prevention Access Campaign launches U=U campaign



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# How HIV Treatment Makes U=U

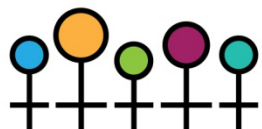
- Chance of transmitting any virus has to do with **amount of virus** (viral load) in body fluids
- HIV drugs prevent virus from **reproducing** (making copies of itself)
- When an HIV treatment regimen works ...
  - HIV is **unable** to reproduce
  - HIV will not infect new cells in body
  - **Viral load remains low**, which means you are...
    - More likely to have a healthy immune system
    - **Less likely to transmit HIV**



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# How HIV Treatment Makes U=U

- HIV drugs **cannot cure HIV**
  - Even when viral load is **undetectable**, there are still 'resting' or latent HIV cells in certain areas (**reservoirs**) of your body
- ... but having an undetectable viral load means there is **barely a trace of virus** in body fluids that transmit HIV
  - Blood, vaginal fluids, semen
  - Breast milk will be discussed later

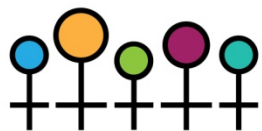


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# The Research Behind U=U

## *The "Swiss Consensus Statement" (2008)*

- Group of HIV care providers in Switzerland produced a paper aimed at other doctors in their country
- Agreed that an HIV+ person who had had an undetectable viral load for at least 6 months on HIV treatment had a **negligible risk** (so small or unimportant that it is not worth considering) of transmitting HIV
  - Based on new data and their patients' experiences

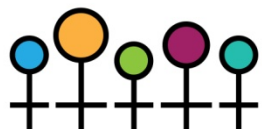


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# The Research Behind U=U

## ***HPTN 052 (2011)***

- Large study – more than 1,000 mostly heterosexual, mixed-status couples
- ***Only 3 cases*** of HIV transmission in study group
  - In each case, partner living with HIV had detectable viral load
  - Their HIV drugs had not yet started working properly, or had stopped working

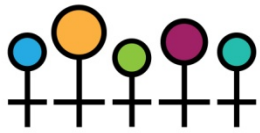


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# The Research Behind U=U

- HPTN 052 ***changed HIV prevention***
  - Put an additional tool – treatment for people living with HIV – in prevention toolbox
- However, ***information not well known or understood*** outside of HIV advocate and expert circles
  - Mainstream media accounts of this news was often confusing, misleading, loaded with HIV stigma
- Many ***people living with HIV were not aware*** of this exciting development





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# The Research Behind U=U

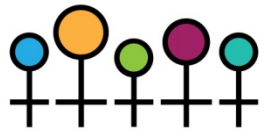
## HPTN 052

- More than 1,000 mixed-status couples
  - Very few transmissions when partner not undetectable

## PARTNER

- Heterosexual and gay mixed-status couples
  - Partners living with HIV on treatment and undetectable
- After **58,000 instances of sex** among 1,166 couples who were **not using condoms, *no HIV acquisition***

Still confusion, misinformation, silence around topic



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# Community and Medical Experts Agree

- 2016: U=U campaign released first-ever **global consensus statement** confirming science behind U=U
- Many organizations have endorsed U=U message
  - The Well Project proudly endorsed consensus statement in April 2017
- Community partners share information in ways that work for their communities
- Part of a strategy to break down HIV **stigma**; provide **hope**; **improve** lives of people living with HIV; move closer to ending HIV as a worldwide epidemic

UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE  
 НЕДЕТЕКТАБИЛНО = НЕПРЕНОСИВО

ЗАЕДНІЦЬКО ЗДОРУЖЕННЯ ЗА ПОДРОЗКІ НА ЛУБЕГО ЖИВІТЬ СІ КІВ - ЗАДНО ПОСІВНИ СІ

**U=U**  
 Undetectable = Untransmittable  
 non rilevabile = non trasmissibile  
**#UequalsU**

**U=U**  
 UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE  
 A PERSON LIVING WITH HIV WHO HAS AN UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD DOES NOT TRANSMIT THE VIRUS TO THEIR PARTNERS.

The International AIDS Society is proud to endorse the U=U consensus statement of the Prevention Access Campaign.



**U=U**  
 UNDETECTABLE EQUALS UNTRANSMITTABLE

IA S  
 SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION  
 NEWS & EVENTS HIV INFO  
 Risk Testing Tre  
 etting your viral load down to undetectable also helps prevent new infections. Studies show that people living with HIV who are on treatment and have a suppressed viral load do not transmit HIV to HIV-negative sex partners. In other words, if you are living with HIV and are an undetectable viral load, you don't have to worry about passing HIV to your sex partners. For many people, being undetectable offers a renewed sense of freedom, brings less anxiety around sex, and reduces stigma associated with HIV.

San Francisco AIDS Foundation supports the Undetectable = Untransmittable message by Prevention Access Campaign. Read more about the initiative.

**U=U**  
**#LOVE POSITIVE**  
 exaequod  
 AIDES



IT STARTS WITH ME I WON'T PASS ON HIV  
 I know that someone doing well on HIV medication can't pass it on. If everybody knew that we can't pass HIV.

NIET DETECTEERBAAR  
 BETEKENT  
 NIET OVERDRAAGBAAR  
**n=n**

An undetectable viral load means we can't pass HIV to our partners.  
 undetectable = untransmittable

**U=U**  
 UNDETECTABLE MEANS UNINFECTIOUS  
 [+U] BODY POSITIVO  
 UNDETECTABLES

HOUSINGWORKS  
 HOW DO YOU BECOME UNDETECTABLE?  
 You don't need to be a superhero to do something powerful for yourself and your community.  
 By regularly taking the right medicine, you can lower the amount of HIV in your blood (your viral load) to become undetectable. A low viral load is a good thing!  
 UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE!  
 People who are undetectable cannot transmit the virus to others, when they're undetectable, you both protect your own health and prevent new HIV infections. And many experts agree!  
 This doesn't mean you no longer have HIV—it means that by continuing your plan of treatment, you can live with HIV by managing your health on your own terms.

PEOPLE WITH HIV ON EFFECTIVE TREATMENT DO NOT SEXUALLY TRANSMIT HIV  
**ACT UP**  
 DUBLIN  
 UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE



**nam** aidsmap  
 HIV & AIDS - sharing knowledge, changing lives

"The scientific evidence is clear. Someone whose HIV is undetectable does not pose an infection risk to their sexual partners."

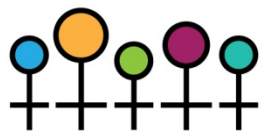
For information on HIV you can rely on: [www.aidsmap.com](http://www.aidsmap.com)

NYC nycHealthy @nycHealthy  
 If your viral load is undetectable means you can't pass HIV to your partners.  
 Treatment = Prevention!  
 staysure #PlaySure #Tas



Undetectable = Untransmittable  
**Podporujemo!**

HIV BELIRLENIYORSA BULAŞTIRILAMAZ. MIT  
**U=U**  
 UNDETECTABLE UNTRANSMITTABLE  
**AIDS** CARES FOR PEOPLE WITH AIDS

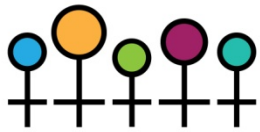


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# Why Didn't I Know About This?

Shifts in attitudes, beliefs, behaviors take time

- For decades, condom use held up as only sure way to stop spread of HIV
- Condom use often encouraged through campaigns and activities based on fear of contact with HIV
- Undetectable viral load as a barrier to HIV transmission has been a difficult message for many to accept
- STIs and unwanted pregnancies remain important issues
  - Condoms prevent these; HIV treatment as prevention does not

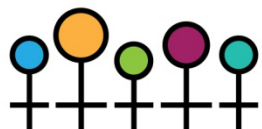


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# Why Didn't I Know About This?

**Intersectional** forms of stigma affect whether U=U message is delivered

- People living with or vulnerable to acquiring HIV are often the same people whose sexuality carries stigma and judgment
  - E.g., transgender people, women of color, older women, young women, people living in poverty
  - Recognizing that TasP can make them unlikely to transmit the virus to their partners may help with stigma and judgment
  - Studies: women living with HIV not told about U=U, people living with HIV overestimate their risk of transmitting HIV
- U=U founder Bruce Richman:
  - Women living with HIV are leading the way

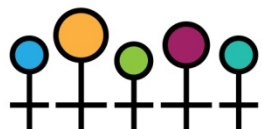


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## Relationship Power Dynamics

- Part of how HIV epidemic is flourishing among women
  - Women may not be able to demand that their partners use condoms due to uneven power dynamics, fear of violence
  - Women may be unable to ask about their partners' treatment status or viral load
    - Partners may not honor a woman's request to use condoms or other barriers, claiming they have an undetectable viral load
- ***Need more research*** into power dynamics and U=U
- Need **woman-controlled prevention** methods

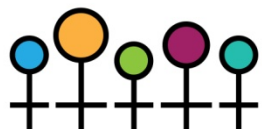


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## Breastfeeding

- While HIV treatment can decrease HIV transmission through breast milk, there may still be some risk
  - Having undetectable viral load in blood may not guarantee undetectable viral load in breast milk
  - In places without refrigeration or safe water, the risk from formula feeding with unsafe water – and the immune benefits of breastfeeding – may outweigh HIV risk



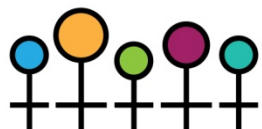
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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## Breastfeeding

- In high-resource areas with safe water, breastfeeding isn't recommended for women living with HIV
  - Experts divided about this in U=U era
  - Not everyone has access to safe water and affordable formula
- Some providers suggest:
  - That women be given all information to make their own choice
  - Be supported to continue taking their HIV treatment
  - Be counseled on reducing potential harms of breastfeeding if they choose to breastfeed



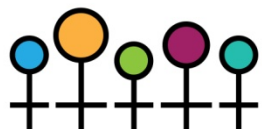


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## HIV Criminalization

- Many countries and U.S. states have laws making it a crime for a person living with HIV to do things (e.g., consensual sex) that are not crimes for HIV- people
- These laws build HIV stigma and discrimination into the legal system
- Do not take into account the realities of living with HIV in the era of U=U
  - U=U has not yet changed status of existing laws

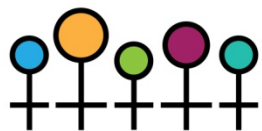


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## HIV Criminalization

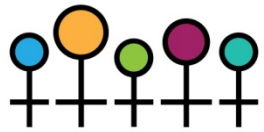
- In opposing these laws, it is important not to stigmatize or criminalize those who have detectable viral loads
- Women, especially, may have a harder time getting their viral loads to undetectable, for reasons including:
  - Being more likely to be diagnosed later in life than men
  - Prioritizing the health of others over their own
  - Higher rates of violence, poverty and instability that comes with these social determinants of health
- ***Criminalizing people based on HIV status is never appropriate, regardless of viral load***



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# The Bottom Line

- Increasing awareness that having an undetectable viral load means that people living with HIV will not transmit the virus can have a ***dramatic impact on public and personal views of HIV***
- HIV stigma = biggest barrier to ending HIV epidemic
  - Stigma must also be removed from HIV testing
- Important to break down stigma by providing access to information, community support, advocacy -- all of which build **hope**
- U=U has the potential to address all kinds of HIV stigma

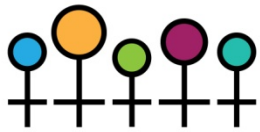


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# The Bottom Line

While researchers must continue to examine promise and impact of treatment as prevention, ***the science that is currently available strongly supports U=U***

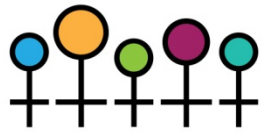
We need to make sure that ***all people living with HIV, or vulnerable to acquiring HIV, have access to this information***, so that they can make informed decisions about their own sexual health and lives



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## Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
  - [Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV](#)
- Visit [Prevention Access Campaign](#) **#UequalsU**
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  - [www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
  - [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](https://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](https://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)



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# Additional Resources

- [#PWNCares 2: Undetectable = Untransmittable](#) (Video)  
– *by Positive Women's Network - USA*
- [If I Am Undetectable I Can't Transmit the HIV Virus](#) (Video Blog)  
– *by Maria T. Mejia*
- [Infant Feeding Basics: For Women Living with HIV in the US](#) (PDF)  
– *from HIVE*
- [Why, for HIV, Undetectable = Untransmittable](#)  
– *by Roger Pebody, from TheBody.com*