Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma

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

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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")
Treatment as Prevention (TasP)

- Foundation of U=U
- Refers to ways we can use HIV treatment regimens to *lower risk of transmitting HIV*
- For people living with HIV (HIV+):
  - Taking HIV drugs can reduce viral load
  - Blood, vaginal fluids, and/or semen (cum) is much less likely to transmit HIV to others
  - Lower viral load = healthier person
  - Mixed-status couples (one partner HIV+, one HIV-) who want to have babies are more likely to safely conceive "the old-fashioned way"

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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 your body
  – **Viral load remains low**, which means you are...
    • More likely to have a healthy immune system
    • Less likely to transmit HIV
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 (e.g., gut, brain, bone marrow)

• ... but having an undetectable viral load means there is barely a trace of virus in body fluids that transmit HIV
  – Blood, vaginal fluids, semen
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
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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PARTNER (2016)

- Looked at HIV transmission risk in heterosexual and gay mixed-status couples
  - Partners living with HIV took HIV treatment, had undetectable viral loads
- After **58,000 instances of sex**, among 1,166 couples who were **not using condoms**, **zero cases of 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
• >1,000 partners comprised of HIV experts, advocacy groups, service organizations, departments of health from 102 countries have endorsed U=U message (as of 9/14/2020)
• Statement translated into 13 languages
  – The Well Project proudly endorsed consensus statement in April 2017
• Partners share info on 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
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
**Intersectional** forms of stigma affect whether U=U message is delivered

- People living with or vulnerable to 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
  - Freedom to enjoy their sexual lives is often limited, not celebrated
  - Recognizing that TasP can make them unlikely to transmit the virus to their partners may help with stigma and judgment
- Study: almost 40% of participants had not been told about U=U by providers
- Other study: participants overestimated their transmission risk
Important U=U Issues for Women

Relationship Power Dynamics

• Part of how HIV epidemic continues to flourish among women globally
  – Women often cannot demand that their partners use condoms due to uneven power dynamics, fear of violence
  – Women may also 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 based on their undetectable viral load

• More research and insight is needed into ways partner power dynamics may affect U=U for women

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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
  – Other factors that affect HIV transmission through breastfeeding
    • E.g., mastitis (breast infection that can occur in breastfeeding mothers) can increase viral load before a woman knows she has it
  – 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 do so
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-negative 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 does not yet change status of existing laws.

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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, which can make it hard to be consistent with medication

• **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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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
• 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
  – www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  – www.twitter.com/thewellproject
Additional Resources

- **U=U: Undetectable = Untransmittable** (Video)  
  – *from Prevention Access Campaign*
- **If I Am Undetectable I Can't Transmit the HIV Virus** (Video Blog)  
  – *by Maria T. Mejia*
- **HIV Undetectable = Untransmittable: Interview With Bruce Richman**  
  – *by Nelson Vergel, from Program for Wellness Restoration*
- **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*