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Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma

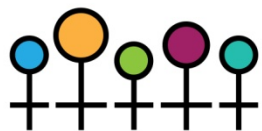
Last update: March 30, 2021

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

#onewomanatatime

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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**

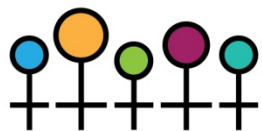
HIV community members, advocates, and experts refer to this as **“Undetectable Equals Untransmittable” (“U=U”)**



Get tested. Stay protected. Find out how at:
StartsWithMe.org.uk



Produced by Terence Higgins Trust for HIV PREVENTION ENGLAND.
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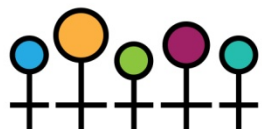


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Treatment as Prevention (TasP)



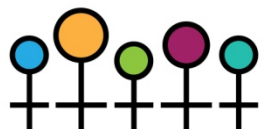
- Foundation of U=U
- Refers to ways we can use HIV treatment regimens to ***lower risk of transmitting HIV***
- For people living with HIV (HIV+):
 - Taking HIV drugs can reduce viral load
 - Blood, vaginal fluids, and/or semen (cum) is much less likely to transmit HIV to others
 - Lower viral load = 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

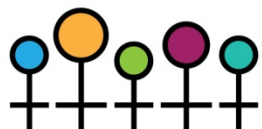
- Chance of transmitting any virus has to do with **amount of virus** (viral load) in body fluids
- HIV drugs prevent virus from **reproducing** (making copies of itself)
- When an HIV treatment regimen works ...
 - HIV is **unable** to reproduce
 - HIV will not infect new cells in your body
 - **Viral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



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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 (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

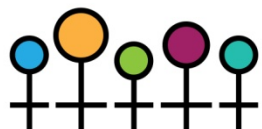


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The Research Behind U=U

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

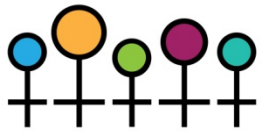


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The Research Behind U=U

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

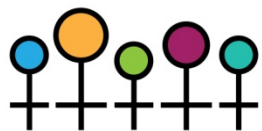


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The Research Behind U=U

PARTNER (2016)

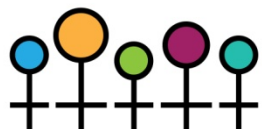
- Looked at HIV transmission risk in heterosexual and gay mixed-status couples
 - Partners living with HIV took HIV treatment, had undetectable viral loads
- After **58,000 instances of sex**, among 1,166 couples who were **not using condoms**, ***zero cases of HIV acquisition***
 - Still confusion, 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

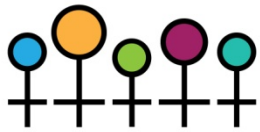


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Why Didn't I Know About This?

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

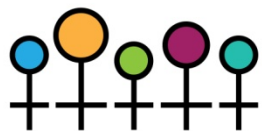


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Why Didn't I Know About This?

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

- People living with or vulnerable to 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

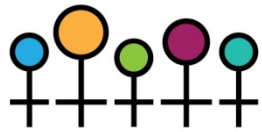


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Important U=U Issues for Women

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

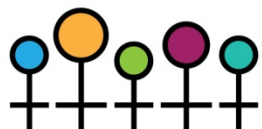


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Important U=U Issues for Women

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

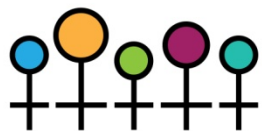


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Important U=U Issues for Women

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

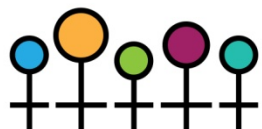


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Important U=U Issues for Women

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 does not yet change status of existing laws

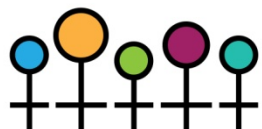


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Important U=U Issues for Women

HIV Criminalization

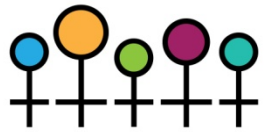
- In opposing these laws, it is important not to stigmatize or criminalize those who have detectable viral loads
- Women, especially, may have a harder time getting their viral loads to undetectable, for reasons including:
 - Being more likely to be diagnosed later in life than men
 - Prioritizing the health of others over their own
 - Higher rates of violence, poverty and instability that comes with these social determinants of health, 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

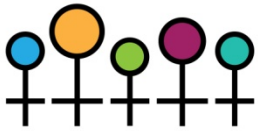


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The Bottom Line

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

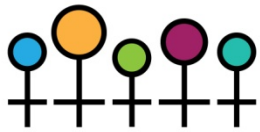
We need to make sure that ***all people living with HIV, or vulnerable to acquiring HIV, have access to this information***, so that they can make informed decisions about their own sexual health and lives



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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
 - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
 - www.twitter.com/thewellproject



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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*