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# Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma

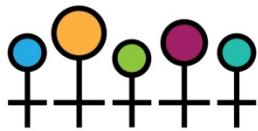
*Last update: November 5, 2019*

*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 taking HIV drugs and their viral load has reached **undetectable** levels (not enough HIV in their bloodstream for a test to measure), that person ***cannot transmit HIV to a 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](http://StartsWithMe.org.uk)

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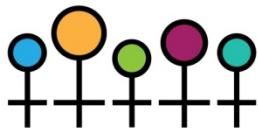




# Treatment as Prevention (TasP)



- Foundation of U=U
- Refers to ways we can use HIV treatment regimens to ***lower risk of transmitting HIV***
- For people living with HIV:
  - 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 living with HIV, one HIV-negative) 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 Research Behind U=U

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

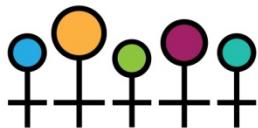
- Group of HIV care providers in Switzerland produced a paper aimed at other doctors in their country
- Agreed that an HIV+ person who had had an undetectable viral load for at least 6 months on HIV treatment had a **negligible risk** (so small or unimportant that it is not worth considering) of transmitting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



# The Research Behind U=U

## **HPTN 052 (2011)**

- Large study – more than 1,000 mostly heterosexual, mixed-status couples
- Showed that partners living with HIV and taking HIV treatment could reduce chance that their HIV-negative partners would acquire HIV by up to 96%
- ***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



# 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

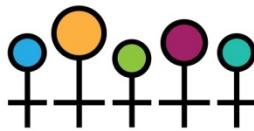


# The Research Behind U=U

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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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# The U=U Campaign

- Launched by health equity program Prevention Access Campaign (PAC) in early 2016
- A project **led by people living with HIV**
- Unites global community of HIV advocates, activists, researchers, community partners
- Mission is to share the fact that ***people living with HIV, who are on effective HIV treatment, do not transmit HIV when they have sex***
- **Tags for social media**
  - #UequalsU
  - #ScienceNotStigma



If your viral load is undetectable, it means you can't pass HIV to others. Treatment = Prevention! [on.nyc.gov/staysure](http://on.nyc.gov/staysure) #PlaySure #TasP



**UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE**  
НЕДЕТЕКАБИЛНО = НЕПРЕНОСЛИВО

ЗАЕДНО  
за живите  
Заден посилни Слије

# U=U

Undetectable = Untransmittable  
non rilevabile = non trasmissibile

#UequalsU



**UNDETECTABLES**

HOUSING WORKS

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. Stop spreading. Find out how at [www.housingworks.org](#). A few small steps is a good thing!

**UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE!**

People who are Undetectable cannot transmit the virus to others. When you're Undetectable, you're healthy and prevent new HIV infections. And many experts agree:

This means you no longer have HIV-in 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**  
**UNDETECTABLE = UNTRANSMITTABLE**

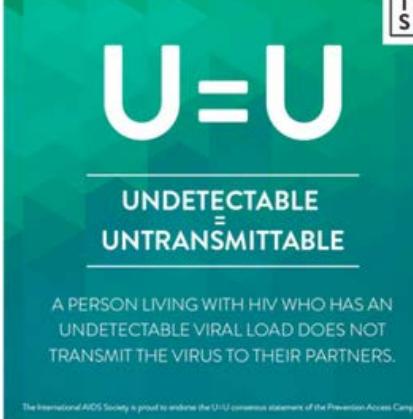
**ACT UP DUBLIN**

**My viral load is undetectable**  
that means I can't "sexually" pass it on to my "FRIENDS"

**U=U**  
**Undetectable = Untransmittable**

**Podporujeme!**  
Phylogenetic analysis has demonstrated that transmission of HIV between individuals is extremely rare in people who are Undetectable. This is because the amount of HIV in their blood is so low that they cannot pass it on to others.

**HIV BELİRELENEMİYORSA BULASTIRILAMAZ, MIT**  
**U=U**  
**UNDETECTABLE UNTRANSMITTABLE**  
**AIDS CARES EQUALS AIDS**



**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)

**U=U** Undetectable Equals Untransmittable



#UequalsUUnited



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# Community and Medical Experts Agree

- 2016: U=U campaign released first-ever **global consensus statement** confirming science behind U=U
- >900 partners comprised of HIV experts, advocacy groups, service organizations, departments of health from 99 countries have endorsed U=U message (as of 11/5/2019)
- Statement translated into at least 13 languages (as of 11/5/2019)
  - 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?

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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

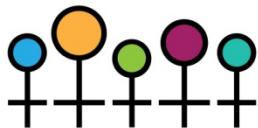


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# Why Didn't I Know About This?

**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 found that almost 40% of women participating had not been told about U=U by providers
- In another study, participants vastly overestimated their own transmission risk



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# Important U=U Issues for Women

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## 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



## Breastfeeding

- HIV treatment can decrease HIV transmission through breast milk, though there may still be some risk
  - More research is needed into the ways in which HIV treatment affects breastfeeding
  - Women living with HIV encouraged to breastfeed in places without refrigeration or safe water,
  - 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 on HIV and women's health divided as to whether or not this should be the case in U=U era
- Some providers suggest:
  - That women be given all information to make their own choice
  - Be supported to continue taking their HIV treatment, whatever their choice

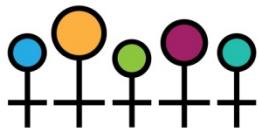


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## HIV Criminalization

- Numerous countries and U.S. states had 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

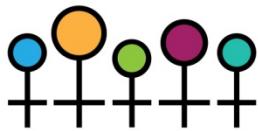


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# Important U=U Issues for Women

## 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***



# 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 wherever possible 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



## 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 becoming HIV+, have access to this life-altering 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](http://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](http://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)