Undetectable Equals Untransmittable: Building Hope and Ending HIV Stigma

Last updated: March 29, 2022

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

#onewomanatatime                                                            #thewellproject

www.thewellproject.org
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"

www.thewellproject.org
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
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

www.thewellproject.org
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
- **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
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

www.thewellproject.org
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

www.thewellproject.org
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

www.thewellproject.org
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
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
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
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

www.thewellproject.org
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

www.thewellproject.org
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

www.thewellproject.org
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

www.thewellproject.org
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
Commonly known as U=U, being undetectable means you can’t transmit the virus to others. This principle is supported by a growing number of medical and public health organizations.

• **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*