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Side Effects

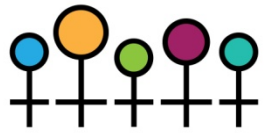
Last updated: June 27, 2025

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

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

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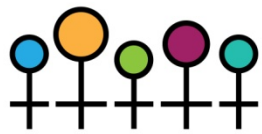
Side Effects and HIV Drugs

Many HIV drugs have been developed that help people live longer, healthier lives

Drugs can cause effects that are different from what they were developed to do

These are called ***side effects***

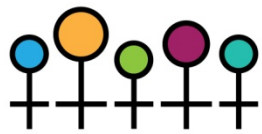




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Side Effects and HIV Drugs

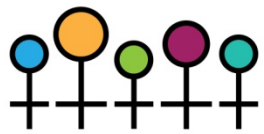
- In most cases, side effects of HIV drugs are mild
 - Sometimes more serious side effects can occur
- Most common during first 4-6 weeks you are taking a new HIV medication
- After your body gets used to new drug, side effects usually get better or go away
 - Some side effects may show up later or last longer
 - We may not yet know about all long-term side effects, especially with newer drugs



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Knowing About Side Effects Can Help

- Each drug comes with information about side effects
 - Can be very long and detailed
 - Reading through it can be scary
 - Drug manufacturers must list even very rare side effects
- ***Not everyone will experience every side effect*** of each drug or experience side effects the same way
 - Many people don't have any side effects from their meds
- Ask provider before starting new treatment
 - Know what to expect
 - Know how to handle problems that may arise



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Knowing About Side Effects Can Help

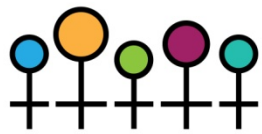
- Ask about possible side effects
- Ask if there are ways of taking the drug that make it easier to tolerate
- Ask about using over-the-counter drugs or home remedies for mild side effects
- Ask when you should get medical attention
- Tell your healthcare provider if you have side effects
 - Do **not stop on your own taking your medications**
- Talk to your provider if side effects get in the way of taking your drugs

Women and Side Effects

- Some appear to be more common in women living with HIV than in men
- Women may have higher levels of certain HIV drugs in their bloodstreams at the same doses as men
 - Smaller body size, metabolism, or hormones may cause the higher levels
- Women seem to benefit as much from HIV treatment as men; no changes in dosing have been recommended for women

Common Side Effects

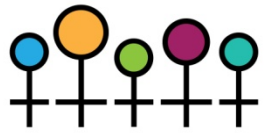
- Nausea and vomiting
 - Often get better after the first weeks of new treatment
- Diarrhea
 - Tell provider if it continues for more than a few days
- Headaches
 - Mild headaches that go away with over-the-counter pain killers are usually not a sign of a serious condition or disease
- Rash
 - Especially common when taking NNRTIs
 - More common and more severe in women



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More Serious Side Effects

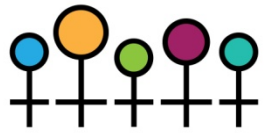
- Kidney problems
 - Make sure you stay hydrated!
- Liver problems
- Lipodystrophy
 - Women more likely to gain fat in breasts, stomach, upper bodies
- Peripheral neuropathy
 - Can cause numbness, tingling, burning, itching, shooting pain
- Lactic acidosis
 - Women, overweight people, those with long history of NRTI use are more likely to develop it



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Other Possible Side Effects

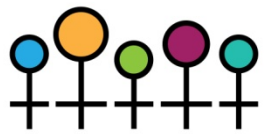
- Some HIV medications may affect heart
- Other medications may affect bone health
- For other side effects:
 - [Health and Medical Issues](#) section on our website



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Side Effects or Toxicities During Pregnancy

- Most studies show that taking HIV drugs during pregnancy does not increase risk of birth defects
- Some HIV drugs should not be used by pregnant people
- Old disagreement on efavirenz (Sustiva, Atripla) now resolved: safe throughout pregnancy



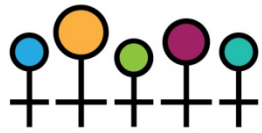
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Side Effects or Toxicities During Pregnancy

- If you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, **speak to your healthcare provider about all of your medications**
- ***Good news:*** There are several HIV drugs that are safe to take during pregnancy
- If taken exactly the way they were prescribed, these HIV drugs can make the chances that you will pass HIV on to your baby very low (less than 1 in 100)

Taking Care of Yourself

- “Side effects” may make them sound like they are not a big problem
 - But if they are getting in the way of your taking your HIV drugs, they may get in the way of your good health
- Having trouble sticking to your HIV drug regimen because of problems with side effects?
 - Speak to your provider before skipping, reducing, stopping your drugs
 - There are things that can be done about side effects



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Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
 - [Side Effects](#)
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV:
 - www.thewellproject.org
 - [@thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/@thewellprojecthiv)
 - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
 - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv
 - www.threads.net/@thewellprojecthiv
 - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv