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Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

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

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Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

- If you're living with HIV, **treatment with HIV drugs can improve your quality of life** and help you stay healthier longer
- ***Starting treatment is a big decision***



Preparing for HIV Treatment

- To get the most benefit from HIV drugs, they **must be used just the way they are prescribed**
- Taking your treatment correctly is as important as which drugs you and your healthcare provider choose
- Before getting started, be prepared!
  - **The right healthcare provider**
  - Enough **knowledge about HIV**
  - **A positive attitude**

Starting Sooner Rather than Later

The results of a study called **the START trial** have shown once and for all:

- **People living with HIV who start treatment early, while CD4 counts are still high, have a much lower risk of illness and death**
  - Including people living with HIV who feel well
- Taking HIV drugs earlier reduced likelihood of developing AIDS-related *and* non-AIDS related illnesses

Consensus Statement

- Scientific experts and policy makers came together in July 2015
  - Issued statement declaring all people living with HIV should have access to HIV treatment as soon as they're diagnosed

Benefits of Starting Early

- A longer life
- Having a higher CD4 cell count and keeping it high
- Preventing further damage to the immune system
- Decreasing risk of HIV-related and non-HIV-related health problems
- Reducing risk of transmitting HIV to others (***Treatment as Prevention*** *or* ***TasP***)
- No risk of transmitting HIV to sexual partners if on treatment and undetectable viral load (***U=U***)

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Risks of Starting Late

- A shorter life
- Severely weakened immune system
  - Can take longer to restore immune system to full strength
  - Can increase chances that people living with HIV will develop AIDS and other serious illnesses
- Greater chance of immune reconstitution syndrome
  - Can worsen infections when HIV drugs are started and CD4 count is low
- Passing HIV to others, including sexual partners and babies, if you become pregnant

Treatment Guidelines

- Issued by a variety of global and national agencies
  - Written and reviewed regularly by HIV experts
- Guidelines on starting HIV treatment:
  - **US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):** All people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count
  - **World Health Organization and others:** Since September 2015 also recommend all people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count

The Right Healthcare Provider

- Ideally:
  - You and your provider work as a team
  - You can choose among providers
  - Neither of these may be true, though
- Are **you and your provider a team?** Ask yourself:
  - Can I be totally honest with them?
  - Are they available when I have questions?
  - Do they take my concerns seriously?
- **If so, great**!

The Right Healthcare Provider

- Not feeling fully respected? Consider talking to your provider or **finding another** (if you are able to choose)
  - Being informed can help you with any provider
- Wise to have a provider who is an **HIV specialist**
  - May not always be an option
- To find HIV specialists near you:
  - Ask for suggestions from friends and/or ASOs
  - American Academy of HIV Medicine (AAHIVM)
  - HIV Medical Association (HIVMA)
  - International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care (IAPAC)

Treatment Goals

- Get your viral load as low as possible for as long as possible
- Preserve, improve health of immune system by increasing the number of CD4 cells
- Improve quality of life and reduce illness
- Reduce risk of transmitting HIV to others

Adherence

Taking drugs on schedule, as prescribed

- To get best benefits from HIV therapy, good adherence is required
- HIV drugs need to be kept at a certain level in your body
- Skipping doses, not taking drugs on time, not following food requirements can cause drugs to be less effective or stop working

Resistance

When a drug can longer fight HIV effectively

- If viral load goes up while taking HIV drugs, you should have a resistance test
- If your HIV develops resistance, you will likely have to change some drugs in your regimen

*The best way to avoid **resistance** is **to take your HIV drugs exactly as directed**!*

A Positive Attitude

When you think about starting treatment, it's important to have a good attitude. May help to know that:

- Starting treatment is the right decision for you
- HIV drugs will help you fight the virus
- You **can** take your medications the right way

A Positive Attitude

- **Think about why you're starting treatment**
  - To keep yourself in good health – for your own sake, and/or for the good of your family, friends, community
- You need not wait until your immune system is damaged before taking HIV drugs
- Newer HIV drugs are much easier on your body and have fewer side effects

A Positive Attitude

When you think about starting treatment, ***it's important not to go it alone***

- Put together a **support system** that may include:
  - Your healthcare provider
  - Social workers
  - Case managers
  - Family and/or friends
  - Support group of other people living with HIV
  - Online communities: The Well Project's *A Girl Like Me*

Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, please read the full fact sheet:
  - Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  - www.thewellproject.org
  - @thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social
  - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/
  - www.threads.net/@thewellprojecthiv
  - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv