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Taking HIV Drugs as Prescribed (Adherence)

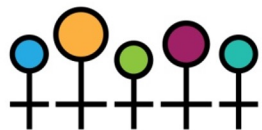
Last updated: August 19, 2026

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

#onewomanatatime

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Strong Drugs to Fight HIV

***Advances in HIV treatment since 1987 approval of first HIV drug have led to development of many HIV meds –
a remarkable accomplishment!***

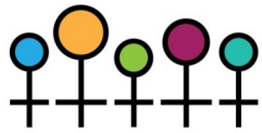
- Using drugs in effective combinations helps many people control their HIV, live longer and healthier lives
- Despite improvements in HIV drug treatment, taking HIV drugs is still a ***lifelong commitment***

What Is Adherence?

Adherence: Taking your drugs exactly as they are prescribed

- For HIV drugs to do their job properly, you need to:
 - Take correct amount at right times
 - Take drugs as directed
 - Get injections on time

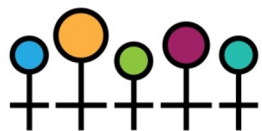




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Importance of Adherence

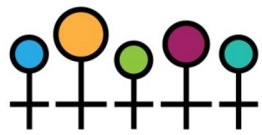
- Drugs get processed by your body, enter your blood stream
 - A certain amount of HIV drugs needs to stay in your blood to fight HIV
 - Taking pills or getting injections on schedule keeps the right amount of drug in your body
 - If drug level falls too low, there's not enough drug to fight HIV



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Adherence and Resistance

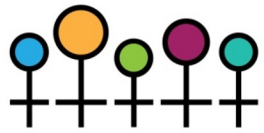
- If you do not take your HIV drugs on schedule or miss an injection
 - Drug levels in your blood will drop
 - HIV will be able to make copies of itself
- When HIV multiplies, viral load increases, CD4 cell count goes down, virus may mutate (change)
- **Resistance:** When HIV mutates, it can survive, even if you're taking your HIV medication



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Adherence and Resistance

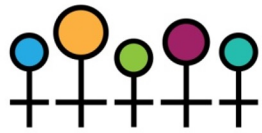
- Cross-resistance: resistance to one drug can cause resistance to others you have not taken
- Resistance can affect your treatment choices in the future
- Some studies suggest you need to take your HIV drugs exactly as prescribed about 95% of the time to get the most benefit
 - That means *missing very few doses*



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Starting and Choosing HIV Drugs

- Starting treatment is a big decision
 - Starting immediately after diagnosis is recommended
- Important to be prepared to take drugs correctly or get injections on time
- Need to commit to lifelong treatment
- Provider will help you choose initial regimen
 - Initial regimen = drugs to start with
 - Considerations for regimen include dosing schedule and side effects



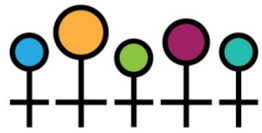
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Barriers to Adherence for Women

- Women often put others' needs before their own
- Other challenges may include:
 - Busy lifestyle
 - Not having disclosed their HIV status
 - Depression
 - Other life stressors, such as childcare or parenting issues
 - Problems with side effects
 - Active substance use or problems with alcohol use
 - Lack of health insurance (in the US)
 - Lack of safe or stable housing
 - Past or current experience of violence or trauma
 - Difficulty swallowing pills

Overcoming Barriers

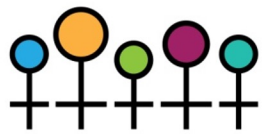
- Despite demands in women's lives, studies show they are just as likely as men to adhere to HIV regimens
- Important to tell healthcare provider when you miss doses or don't take HIV drugs correctly
- (S)he may suggest a change in dosing schedule or drug regimen
 - Newer drugs and combination pills require fewer pills, have fewer food restrictions, are smaller than older drugs
- Injection every 2 months may be an option



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Adherence Tips

- Understand that the drugs will help you fight virus, stay well
 - If you don't think they will, you won't take your pills correctly
 - If you have doubts, speak to your provider or staff at ASO
- Some women find it helpful to connect their pill-taking with a higher purpose or good intention
- Use a daily activity to remind you to take your pills
 - When it's time for the activity, it's also time to take your pills
 - If you have children who take medications or vitamins, take your pills when they take theirs
 - *Store your medications out of reach of children!*



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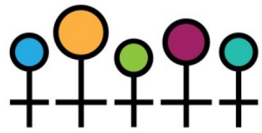
Adherence Tips

- If you don't want others to know, slip away to a bathroom. If you can't, say the pills are for something else or are vitamins.
- If substance or alcohol use, or depression keep you from taking your drugs correctly, talk to your provider, case manager
- Use tools from your clinic or pharmacy: pillboxes, calendars, diaries, beepers to help you remember to take your medication
- Try a smartphone app that sends medication reminders
- If you remove labels on pill bottles, develop a system to help you remember which HIV drugs to take and when
- Plan ahead for refills or trips so you do not run out
- Ask your pharmacy about blister packing if you take many drugs

Finding Support

- Adherence is hard work
 - *It helps to understand why it is important and to have a support network*
- There are many resources for helping you take your HIV drugs

Adherence is key to ensuring that HIV drugs work, maintaining one's health, keeping one's viral load undetectable, and preventing transmission



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Learn More!

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