

Frequently asked questions (FAQs) about HIV medicines

This leaflet is designed to help answer your questions about taking medicines to manage your HIV. It is not supposed to replace the patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine, but is intended to be read alongside it. If you have any further questions or are unsure about any of the information in this leaflet, please speak to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Why have I been given this medication?

The aims of HIV treatment are to prevent serious illness and protect your immune system from the HIV virus. This involves taking an effective combination of drugs to keep your viral load well-controlled.

How does my medication work?

Your medication stops the virus from making copies of itself and multiplying in your body. This prevents further damage to the immune system and reduces the amount of HIV in your blood to such low levels that they are undetectable.

What does viral load mean?

The viral load is the amount of HIV virus in a person's blood. A high viral load means that the virus is replicating quickly and there may be uncontrolled HIV infection. The lower your viral load, the better. With treatment, your viral load can become undetectable.

What does it mean to be undetectable?

Taking HIV medicines as prescribed means that the levels of HIV in your blood become so low that the blood test used in clinic cannot detect the virus. This doesn't mean that there is no virus left, just that the levels are incredibly small. When your virus is undetectable you cannot pass the virus onto any sexual partners provided you are taking your medication every day. This is also known as U=U, Undetectable = Untransmittable.



When should I start taking HIV medicines?

It is recommended that all people with HIV start treatment as soon as possible after their diagnosis. Evidence has shown that there are clear benefits of taking treatment even if you are feeling well. Some people will want to start treatment straight away and others may need a bit more time.

How will my treatment be monitored?

As part of your routine care, you will be seen regularly in clinic to review your treatment and monitor your health. Blood tests will be done to check that the treatment is working effectively and safely for you. Two important blood tests that will be measured are your CD4 count and viral load.

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What does CD4 count mean?

The CD4 cell count is a type of white blood cell that fights infections in the body. In someone with HIV, the virus attacks and destroys these cells which weakens the immune system. Monitoring the CD4 count is a good indicator of how well your immune system is working. The higher your CD4 count, the better.

Will my medication cure me of HIV?

There is currently no known cure for HIV, but research is ongoing. It can be successfully managed with HIV medicines which suppress the amount of virus in the body and allow people living with HIV to live long, healthy lives.

Are there any side effects of HIV treatment?

The side effects of HIV medicines are often mild and serious effects rarely occur. Common side effects that may occur include headaches, stomach disturbances (e.g. nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea) and tiredness. Newer forms of medicines are well-tolerated and tend to cause fewer side effects. If you experience any side effects, speak with your clinic for further advice.

See below for a list of **common** side effects and how they can be managed.

Side effect	What should I do?
Rash/allergic symptoms	Some HIV medication may cause a hypersensitivity (allergic) reaction. You should tell your doctor if you develop a new rash. Seek medical attention if you have difficulty breathing and/or swelling.
Headaches	For short-term pain relief, you can take paracetamol or ibuprofen. Do not take ibuprofen if you have stomach ulcers or asthma, or have been advised you to avoid NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) for any reason. Speak to your team if you have ongoing headaches or the pain is becoming worse.
Diarrhoea	For short-term diarrhoea relief, you can take loperamide. This can be bought from pharmacies and supermarkets. Remember to drink plenty of fluids. If it lasts more than a few days, contact your clinic for further advice.
Heartburn (acid reflux)/ indigestion	Medicines such as omeprazole, lansoprazole or Gaviscon can help to ease these symptoms. Not all HIV medication can be taken with these medicines. Please speak with your doctor or pharmacist first.
Sleep problems	A small number of patients taking integrase inhibitors e.g. dolutegravir, bictegravir may experience this. These symptoms may go away by taking the medicine in the morning instead. Speak to your doctor if this continues.

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Are there any interactions between HIV medicines and other medicines I take?

Drug interactions can change the effectiveness of your medication. It is important that you tell anyone prescribing you medication about any medicines you are taking. This includes prescribed medicines and/or supplements you buy over the counter, herbal and recreational or party drugs.

Please read the HIVPA information leaflet for your medication for a list of the most common drug interactions. A **full list** of interacting drugs is provided in the patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine.

What should I do if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose, in most cases you can take it as soon as you remember. Please see the relevant HIVPA information leaflet for your medicine for further advice. If you are having difficulty taking your HIV medication each day, speak to a member of your clinic healthcare team. Together, you can identify reasons for this and make a plan.

What are the long-term effects of HIV treatment?

The benefits of taking HIV medication outweigh the side effects. These treatments can help people live long, healthy lives with a reduced risk of complications later on in life. You will be reviewed at your appointment for any changes and offered an alternative combination if required.

Can I stop taking my medication?

Do not stop taking your medication without speaking to your healthcare team first. Stopping and starting your medication is also not recommended. Not taking your medication as prescribed will allow the virus to multiply again and the levels of HIV in your blood will increase. This can put you at risk of serious infections and increase your risk of developing drug resistance.

Can I take alcohol with my medication?

There are no interactions between alcohol and HIV medication. However, it is advised that you follow national recommendations of weekly alcohol consumption. Patients with liver disease e.g. hepatitis should keep their alcohol intake to a minimum or preferably avoid drinking.

Can I take HIV medication if I'm pregnant or breastfeeding?

If you become pregnant or are planning to start a family, **do not stop** taking your medication. Speak to your clinic so that your care can be managed appropriately. It is important you are on effective treatment to reduce the risk to your unborn child.

Taking HIV medicines protects your baby as well as you. Your viral load needs to be undetectable to breastfeed your baby. This means taking your HIV medicines at the right time every day.

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Can I take party or street drugs with my medication?

Street drugs and party drugs **may** interact with your medication. Don't be afraid to tell your team if you use other drugs. They can give you specific advice based on the medication you are taking and help minimise any risks to your health.

Will this medication affect my weight?

Some, but not all, medicines may cause weight gain. Often people will notice they gain weight after starting HIV treatment. This is known as the 'return to health' effect and is a good indicator that the treatment is working for you. If you have any concerns about a change in your weight, speak to your healthcare team.

What should I do if am running low on medication?

It is important that you do not run out of medication. If you find that you are running low on medication, contact your clinic to request a prescription. If you are out-of-area from your regular clinic, it may be possible for another clinic within the area you are visiting to provide a short supply of medication whilst you are away. Your regular clinic should be able to help to locate a nearby clinic and provide any information they need.

If you are going to be admitted into hospital as a patient, please bring your medicines in with you.

If I am running low on medication, can I spread out the supply I have left?

If you are running low on medication, continue taking your current supply of medication until it finishes. Do not try to spread out the remaining supply. This can lead to ineffective treatment and drug resistance which can have consequences for your health.

Can I travel abroad with my medication?

There are no restrictions at UK airports on carrying tablet and capsule medications in hand and hold luggage. Keep all your medication in its original packaging and with the clinic label. You do not have to state the condition you are taking the medicine for. For most countries you can legally take in medicines provided you can show it is for your personal use. Your clinic can provide a travel letter if you request it.

Where can I go for further support?

Many HIV clinics have peer support groups that provide valuable support to people living with HIV. Speak to your clinic for more information. Further information can also be found on [HIV i-base](#) and [Terrence Higgins Trust](#).