

# HIV: Just Diagnosed

Your provider has just told you that you tested positive for HIV. That means you are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV is now considered a treatable chronic disease. That means HIV can be managed with medications, similar to diabetes or high blood pressure. Although HIV cannot be cured, excellent medications are available that will help you live a long, healthy, and productive life. Living with HIV should not stop you from having safe and fulfilling sexual and emotional relationships when you are ready.

## HIV Treatment

Your provider will order lab tests to determine how your immune system is functioning and which medication(s) would be best for you. Your provider will explain more about HIV, some of the available treatments to fight the disease, and the importance of taking your medications every day (adherence). They will answer any questions you have, and may refer you to an HIV specialist. Pharmacists, nurses, mental health providers and social workers who specialize in HIV care can also provide information and support.

Your HIV provider will recommend that you start HIV medications, ideally right away. Many HIV medications are taken just once a day. If you take them every day as prescribed, your immune system will become stronger and you will be less likely to develop symptoms or illnesses related to HIV.

## Common Concerns

### Can I pass HIV to others?

Yes, HIV can be passed (transmitted) from someone with HIV infection to someone without HIV, mainly through sexual contact or blood-to-blood contact (for example, by sharing equipment used to inject drugs). It also can be passed from a mother with HIV to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

### What can I do to protect others?

*Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U)*

People living with HIV who take their HIV medications every day as prescribed can prevent HIV from replicating (making copies of itself). Over time, this can lead to an undetectable viral load, meaning that the amount of HIV in the blood is so little that routine tests cannot measure it. People who maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV to their HIV-negative partners. This is also known as 'treatment as prevention.'

### *PrEP for partners*

If you have a partner who is HIV negative, your partner may want to consider using PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis). PrEP is a pill that can be taken once a day to prevent HIV infection. PrEP is very effective if it is taken every day. PrEP is available to Veterans who use VA for their health care. There are many other ways that non-Veterans can obtain PrEP including national donation programs and local health departments.

### *Use Condoms*

Condoms are very effective in preventing the transmission of HIV during sex, if they are used correctly and consistently. Condoms also protect you against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Your VA provider can prescribe condoms for you at no cost to you.



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### *Practice safer drug use*

If you inject or snort drugs, VA has treatment options to help you stop. Talk to your provider to learn more. If you can't or aren't ready to stop, you can protect others by practicing safer drug use. Sharing needles, syringes, and other equipment with others has a high risk for transmitting HIV. Ask your provider about whether a syringe services program is available locally.

#### **What else can I do to stay healthy?**

It is very important that people with HIV maintain a healthy and active lifestyle. Your provider will have some suggestions for you. These may include eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, drinking lots of water, limiting alcohol use, and getting plenty of sleep. Your provider will recommend certain vaccinations to prevent other infections, and may make other suggestions based on your individual needs.

Stay connected to friends and family members. You will need to tell your sex partner(s) about your HIV status, but you are not obligated to tell anyone else, including your employer. Your feelings about talking to others about HIV may change as you become more comfortable with your diagnosis.

You may wish to have your partner accompany you to a clinic visit to provide support and to have their questions and concerns addressed. You can request a referral to a social worker or therapist if needed.

#### **Who can I talk to about my diagnosis and follow-up treatment?**

Stay in touch with your provider so you can ask any questions about your diagnosis, medications, or side effects. It is very important that you take your medication as prescribed every day. Do not skip doses or stop taking your medications unless you have discussed this with your provider. You should discuss follow-up care with your provider including lab tests and future appointments (at HIV and other clinics).

## Additional Resources

- ▶ HIV Website  
<https://www.hiv.va.gov>
- ▶ Information about PrEP  
<https://www.hiv.va.gov/products/prep-patient-factsheets.asp>
- ▶ Ready Set PrEP donation program  
<https://www.hiv.gov/federal-response/ending-the-hiv-epidemic/prep-program>
- ▶ Harm Reduction Coalition  
<https://harmreduction.org/>