

FAST FACTS ABOUT HIV TREATMENT

What is antiretroviral treatment?

Antiretroviral drugs are used in the treatment and prevention of HIV infection. The aim of antiretroviral treatment is to keep the amount of HIV in the body at a low level. This stops any weakening of the immune system and allows it to recover from any damage that HIV might have caused already. Antiretroviral treatment consists of drugs that have to be taken every day for the rest of a person's life.

What is the most common life-threatening opportunistic infection affecting people living with HIV?

Tuberculosis (TB) kills nearly a quarter of a million people living with HIV each year. It is the number one cause of death among HIV-infected people in Africa, and a leading cause of death in this population worldwide. The risk of developing tuberculosis is estimated to be between 12-20 times greater in people living with HIV than among those without HIV infection.

There are a number of core health care strategies that are critical to prevent and manage TB infection among people living with HIV:

- intensified case finding for active TB
- isoniazid preventive treatment
- TB infection control
- early initiation of antiretroviral therapy.

Is there a cure for HIV?

No, there is no cure for HIV. But with good and continued adherence to antiretroviral treatment, the progression of HIV in the body can be slowed to a near halt. Increasingly, people living with HIV can remain well and productive for extended periods of time, even in low-income countries.

Can people living with HIV live a healthy life if on treatment?

People with HIV can live long and healthy lives with access to treatment. Since HIV was first reported substantial progress in the research and development of antiretroviral drugs has been made. There are now more than 20 approved antiretroviral drugs. Despite this, people with HIV face many barriers to accessing affordable, effective HIV treatment.

Taking HIV treatment requires effort and commitment as drugs must be taken at exact times each day. Some people may experience serious side-effects or may not respond to certain drugs. Treatment, care and support can help people to adhere to treatment and address any problems they may have with their treatment regimen.

How about side effects of treatment?

Like most medicines, antiretroviral drugs can cause side effects. Some side effects appear shortly after starting an antiretroviral drug and disappear within a few weeks as the body gets used to the new chemicals. This is often the case with nausea, diarrhoea and headache, for example.

Unfortunately other side effects – such as peripheral neuropathy (nerve damage) and lipodystrophy (fat redistribution) – tend to worsen over time and may never go away. Also some problems may not emerge until months or even years after treatment is started. They can have a major impact on health or quality of life.

Once started, antiretroviral treatment must be taken every day for life. Every missed dose increases the risk that the drugs will stop working. It is therefore vital that people receiving antiretroviral treatment get all the help they need to minimise the impact of side effects. Often there are several ways to lessen the harm, either by treating the side effects or by switching to alternative antiretroviral drugs.

2014

Source:

World Health Organisation: www.who.int

UNAIDS: www.unaids.org

Centers for Disease Prevention and Control: www.cdc.gov