



plain and simple facts

# DRUG INFORMATION



## General Approaches to Treating HIV

Treating HIV means more than just taking medications. It also means making changes in your life that will enhance your health and prevent you from getting sick.

In general, there are 3 main ways to treat HIV:

1. controlling the HIV virus
2. improving your health and immune system
3. preventing illnesses and HIV/AIDS-related infections

### 1. Controlling the HIV virus:

This usually includes taking anti-HIV medications (anti-retrovirals) that reduce the amount of HIV virus in your body or slow down its reproduction. The less HIV virus in your body and the more T cells you have, the healthier you can be.

Deciding to start anti-HIV medications is a big decision. The medications have benefits, but they may also have side effects that can be unpleasant or even harmful. You have to be ready before you start these medications because usually they need to be taken on a regular schedule every day for them to work. This may involve making some changes in your daily routine and habits.

It is important to find a doctor who is knowledgeable about HIV treatment and is sensitive to your situation and culture when working with you in making treatment decisions.

In general, anti-HIV medications are recommended if:

- your T-cell count (measure of your immune system) is less than 350.
- your viral load (measure of amount of HIV virus in your blood) is greater than 55,000.
- you have had any symptoms of HIV disease.

The current standard of HIV treatment includes the use of a combination of at least 3 different anti-HIV medications from different classes.

### 2. Improving your health and immune system:

This includes many methods that promote general health and taking therapies that may enhance your immune system.

Some basic approaches include:

- getting emotional and spiritual support to deal with your stress
- a nutritious diet
- adequate rest

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- regular exercise
- taking vitamins and mineral supplements that enhance your general health
- taking medications, herbs or supplements that strengthen the immune system
- using complementary therapies

### 3. Preventing illnesses and HIV-related infections:

This includes checking for diseases, having immunizations or vaccines to prevent diseases and taking certain medications to prevent some common infections that people with HIV/AIDS tend to get.

Screening tests recommended for people with HIV include:

- regular blood work (every 2 to 6 months, depending on your health) to check your immune system (CD4+ count), the activity of the virus (viral load), complete blood count, and the functions of your body's different organs and systems (such as kidney and liver).
- initial screening blood test to check if you have been exposed to some infections common in people with HIV, such as hepatitis (B and C), CMV, toxoplasmosis, syphilis.
- swabs to screen all common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- chest X-ray initially and TB skin test once a year.
- Pap smear at least once a year for women.

Immunizations or vaccinations that are recommended for people with HIV include:

- pneumonia vaccine (once every 5 years)
- flu vaccine (once a year around winter time)
- hepatitis B vaccine (if you have not been exposed to the hepatitis B virus already)
- hepatitis A vaccine (if you have not been exposed to the hepatitis A virus already)
- booster vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and polio (once every 10 years)

Medications recommended for preventing HIV-related infections include:

- If your T-cell count is below 200, consider taking medication to prevent PCP (*Pneumocystis pneumonia*), a common form of HIV-related pneumonia. Common medications used for this purpose include: Septra (TMP/SMX), Dapsone (avlosulfon), Mepron (atovaquone) or aerosolized pentamidine by inhalation.
- If your T-cell count is below 100, consider taking medication to prevent MAC (*Mycobacterium avium* complex), a bacterial infection that can cause many symptoms in the body. Common medications used for this purpose include: Zithromax (azithromycin), Biaxin (clarithromycin) and Mycobutin (rifabutin).
- In addition, if you suffer from repeated herpes or yeast infections, your doctor may recommend regular medications to be taken to prevent these infections.

Make sure you let your doctor and pharmacist know about all the prescription and non-prescription drugs you are taking (including complementary therapies, herbs and supplements), so they can get a complete picture of your treatment and be able to advise you of any possible interactions among them.



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**Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.**



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