

## TREATING HIV/AIDS TREATMENT INFORMATION

Advances have been made in treatments for HIV/AIDS that have made HIV a treatable disease. There is no cure. It is not known how long the medications will extend life, but some patients started on the new medications remain healthy many years later. The newest medications have easier dosing schedules and fewer food requirements. Patients who take all their medications properly do much better than patients that do not.

### VIRAL LOAD TESTS

Physicians use viral load testing to monitor the progress of HIV levels in the blood and to help decide if or when to change medications. The goal of treatment is to keep the blood level of HIV at an undetectable level. However, an undetectable level does not mean that someone is no longer infected with HIV. HIV still remains in the body.

### DRUG COMBINATION THERAPY

#### What it can do

- HAART (**highly active antiretroviral therapy**) is a combination of several drugs taken to decrease the growth of HIV.
- Antiretroviral drugs can increase life expectancy.
- Antiretroviral drugs can also make an HIV-positive person feel healthier.

#### What it cannot do

- No drug has been discovered that cures HIV/AIDS.
- Current drug therapies do not prevent the transmission of HIV. Even if an HIV-positive person feels free of HIV, he/she should still engage in healthy behaviors, such as the use of condoms and clean needles, to prevent transmitting the disease.
- In some cases, drug therapies for HIV will not always make a person feel better. An HIV-infected person might experience side effects, such as nausea, headaches, weakness and diarrhea, while on the drug treatment.

#### Importance of sticking to drug therapy routines:

Even though drug therapies can be inconvenient (many pills must be taken at precise times throughout the day), it is crucial to stick to the drug regimen. Skipping a dose of the drugs may enable HIV to mutate into a drug-resistant strain that may not be effectively treated by the medication.

### OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTIONS

Opportunistic infections are active infections that frequently occur in people with damaged immune systems but are unusual in those with normal immune systems. Tuberculosis (TB) can be an opportunistic infection and is the most common cause of death for people with HIV/AIDS throughout the world. A skin test or a chest X-ray help to identify persons with tuberculosis. TB infection may develop into active TB disease, which presents with severe coughing, fever, fatigue and weight loss. TB drugs are available but must be taken routinely to prevent drug-resistant strains.

Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is transmitted through the same means as HIV, especially through injection drug use. Therefore, many HIV-positive people are also infected with HCV. HIV accelerates the progression of this liver-damaging virus.

Anal and cervical cancers, which are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), occur at a greater rate in HIV-positive people.

Pneumocystis jirovecii pneumonia (PCP) causes a pneumonia in patients with advanced HIV. PCP remains the most common AIDS-defining illness in the United States.

#### PREVENTING OPPORTUNISTIC INFECTIONS

Keeping track of the CD4 level in an HIV-positive person's blood helps determine whether or not to start certain prophylaxis. Although HAART reduces the rate of opportunistic infections, it is still important for HIV-positive people to use prevention techniques or drugs to further reduce the chance of acquiring an opportunistic infection.

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