

Understanding HIV better for a better life with HIV



SENSOA
TALK(S) ABOUT SEX



Vlaanderen
is zorgzaam en
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In short

What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?

- **HIV** (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that attacks the immune system. It can lead to AIDS if left untreated.
- The immune system defends the body against viruses and bacteria. This prevents you from getting sick.
- **AIDS** (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is the stage a person enters when HIV goes untreated. The immune system is then so weak that the body can no longer defend itself.

HIV can be treated, but a cure has not been found yet.

- A person with HIV can carry the virus for several years without having symptoms. Such a person is HIV-positive even if that person is not sick.
- Many people live with HIV but do not know it. Therefore, they may pass on the virus unknowingly. That is why it is important that a test identifies the infection. After that, treatment can start.

What does the treatment do?

HIV is treated with medication.

- Treatment **lowers the viral load**, which is the amount of HIV in the blood.
- The treatment increases the body's immune cells (CD4). This **strengthens the immune system**.
- The treatment prevents the virus from spreading in the body and attacking other cells. **It puts the virus to 'sleep'**.
- Treatment varies from person to person. Everyone also reacts differently to treatment. The doctor and team will explain when and how best to take the medication.

Questions about treatment

HIV medication: how to take it?

- Take your medication **every day at a fixed time**.
- Take the **correct dose**.
 - Still forgot your medication? Then try to take everything within the next two hours afterwards.
 - Use a tool to avoid forgetting your medication, such as a reminder in your mobile phone or a seven-day pill box.
 - Are you also taking other medications? Plant-based or alternative treatment, for example? This can affect how your HIV medication works. Seek advice from your doctor.
- Pay attention to what you eat and drink: follow the doctor's advice.

What is adherence? Why is it important?

Therapy adherence means **taking your medication at a set time every day**. This way, the amount of medication in your blood always remains the same. If you take the medication correctly, the medication will continue to work properly and you will stay healthy.

- Are you not taking your medication regularly? Then you run the risk of the medication no longer working correctly. Are you bothered by the medication? Seek advice from your doctor.
- Don't hesitate to talk to your doctor about any difficulties taking the medication. You can talk about feeling bad about medication, tolerating medication badly, forgetting medication, sleeping badly, etc.

Testimonials



"Taking medication in the right way is very important because you avoid getting sick and your body is more resistant to diseases."

"Before following my treatment correctly, I lost a lot of weight. Now I have my normal weight back."



"I am 68 years old and I have had HIV for 29 years. In the beginning, it was not easy. But when I started treatment, I felt like living again. Right now, my viral load is undetectable. I am comfortable with it. I see the future positively."

What are the side effects?

The body can sometimes **react differently to medication**. We call these unwanted effects 'side effects'.

Today, HIV treatment causes fewer and fewer side effects.

Short-term side effects (at first)

There may be side effects **because the body has to get used to the new medication**. These may include diarrhoea, nausea, fatigue, insomnia, lack of appetite, headache, dizziness, nervousness.

Usually, these side effects disappear after a few weeks.

If you experience side effects, talk to your doctor about them. Your doctor can then adjust the treatment.

Long-term side effects

Side effects with long-term health issues are less common. These may include:

- Kidney problems
- Cardiovascular problems due to more fats (cholesterol) or sugar (glucose) in the blood
- Bone problems
- Psychological problems
- Sexual problems

Testimonials



"I have a general check-up and medical analyses done regularly. The doctor explains the results to me. I understand it better. If I have side effects, I talk about them and together we find a solution."

"I was itching because of the medication. My doctor adjusted my treatment and since then I no longer have that problem and am doing well."



"In my case, I also have to undergo cancer treatment. They need to monitor my kidneys and liver. The hospital team always pays attention to the interaction between different medications."

"It is important to tell the medical team what I feel: pain, dizziness, nightmares, etc. That helps them make decisions about my care."



What is an undetectable viral load?

- The viral load is the amount of HIV in the blood of a person living with HIV.
- The treatment can make it so that a viral load is 'undetectable'. This means that **the amount of virus in the blood is so low** that instruments in a laboratory cannot measure it.
- If your levels are undetectable, **you no longer have to worry about passing on HIV**. That gives you peace of mind and confidence. It can also be good for your self-esteem.
- In addition, it can also make you enjoy sex and relationships more.
- Your body is also **healthier** and **you have a normal resistance to infections**.
- But the virus is still in your blood. You are still HIV-positive. The virus can multiply again if you do not follow your treatment correctly. So, you should continue to take your medication and visit your doctor at the agreed times.
- Treatment methods have greatly improved. The viral load can remain undetectable for a lifetime as long as you adhere to your therapy.

Testimonials

"Since my viral load is undetectable, I am resistant to infections; I no longer feel vulnerable. I work, I go on holiday, etc."



"Finally, I can think about being pregnant without the risk of passing on the virus to my child."

"Now I have the energy, the strength to work. I feel in good health. I am in shape."



- If your viral load is undetectable, you cannot pass HIV to your partner. Not even through sex without a condom. But you can still get and pass on another sexually transmitted disease (STI).
- If your viral load is not yet undetectable, but you want to have sex with your partner without a condom, your partner can possibly take PrEP. This is a medication that protects against transmission of HIV. It is best to discuss this with the doctor or nurse.
- If the viral load is undetectable, then there is no risk if you want to conceive or have children.

Testimonial



"I have been undetectable since 2009. I always take my treatment very well. My wife, who is HIV-negative, and I decided to have more children. We went to see my doctor. The latter examined us and told us there were no problems (STIs, etc.). We are faithful. We now have three beautiful children in good health and my wife remains HIV-negative. We are taking advantage of life!"

Questions on daily life

How do I live a healthy life?

A healthy lifestyle is always good, especially if you are living with HIV. This means:

- A balanced diet is important for everyone. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables.
- Eat enough because the body needs energy. It is better to maintain a stable weight and avoid obesity.
- Reduce your sugar and high-fat food intake. Fast sugars (soft drinks, sweets, cakes, doughnuts, etc.) and saturated fats (such as fried food and mayonnaise) are not good for your health.
- Get enough sleep.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Stop or cut down on smoking.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and drugs. They increase stress levels in your body.

Required foods

- Fruit and vegetables
- Starch: bread, rice, semolina, chickpeas, potatoes, sweet potatoes, yam, lentils, pulses, pasta, millet, fonio, cassava, sorghum, grain, corn, etc.
- Proteins: meat, poultry, fish, eggs, pulses, dried pome fruit, etc.
- Dairy products: milk, cheese, etc.
- Fatty substances: fatty nutrients, oil, butter, etc.

What are good habits?

- Exercise is good for your health and makes you feel better about yourself. So go for regular walks or runs, go swimming or cycling, play sports, take the stairs, go to the gym, etc.
- Stress can weaken the immune system. Try to avoid stress by getting busy with a hobby, doing activities with other people, relaxing, etc.

Testimonials



"I eat at regular times and take time to eat without stress. I use olive oil for frying and I avoid snacks."

"I had very high cholesterol. Since I eat fewer bad fats and walk, my results have been better."



"When I exercise, I feel stronger, more relaxed. I breathe easier, I sleep better. Even just a little bit of exercise every day is better than nothing!"

Questions about my relationships

How do I tell someone that I am HIV-positive?

- Talking about HIV is not always easy. But it can help you cope with the diagnosis. It is often a relief when you can talk to someone about it.
- Telling someone this should be a personal decision. You have to feel ready for it.
- There is no such thing as the 'right' way to talk about it. The important thing is to talk to someone you trust, who will not tell everyone.
- It is important to choose the right time and a suitable location.
- There is no law requiring you to talk about your health condition at work.
- It can start to weigh heavily if you hide the fact that you are living with HIV. Talking about it can provide a feeling of relief.



Testimonials

"When I told people that I was HIV-positive, I felt relieved, liberated. Some distanced themselves, but others gave me support. I feel less alone."



"The reassurance was important, that I was under treatment, that I could continue to study, go out, etc. in short, just live!"

"I wanted to tell the truth: that I would always have to take medication. I explained what HIV is, and had a brochure for them. That went well."



How do I find a partner and experience my sexuality?

- The desire to share your life with someone often comes a while after the diagnosis. It is possible to start a new relationship, but HIV often makes this complicated. There is fear of the other person's judgement.
- If you are afraid to take steps to find a partner, talk about it with someone you trust. This could be someone who is also living with HIV and had a good experience, an HIV specialist, or a psychologist.
- Getting out of your isolation and meeting others is important. You can talk freely about it at Sensoa Positief, AT4SH (All Together For Sexual Health), Muungano vzw, and the HIV reference centres.
- You may lose any desire for sex after the diagnosis. Many people gradually start feeling desire again.
- Being HIV-positive does not mean you can no longer have sex. This can also be done with people who are HIV-negative. If your viral load is undetectable, you cannot transmit the virus. Your partner can also take PrEP, the medication that prevents the transmission of

HIV. Or you can use condoms. Discuss this with your partner and your attending doctor.

- Always properly use a female or male condom in any sexual relationship (vaginal, anal, oral). This prevents the transmission of HIV and also other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- At the start of any new relationship, discuss your boundaries with your partner and make agreements.

Testimonials



"I observe someone; I get to know her. If she accepts me as I am, we will move on. If she rejects me, I will stop."

"We went to the association together to properly understand how to protect ourselves and others. We talk a lot. We feel respected. We make love again with pleasure!"



Remember this

HIV is located

- In the blood,
- In semen (also in the pre-cum released before ejaculation),
- In vaginal discharge (also in menstrual blood),
- In anal mucosa,
- In breast milk. Do you still want to breastfeed? If so, discuss this with a specialist doctor or midwife. Together, you can look at how to minimise the risk of transmission to your baby.

HIV is transmitted

- During unprotected vaginal, anal, and oral sex,
- By contact with contaminated blood (transfusion, shared needles, cutting objects, or use of unsterile injection materials),
- From an HIV-positive mother to the child during pregnancy when the mother is untreated,
- Through breastfeeding when the woman is not treated. Women who wish to breastfeed can discuss this with the treating doctor.

What is safe for HIV?

- You cannot transmit HIV by kissing, shaking hands, or hugging.
- Coughing, sneezing, or contact with saliva or tears cannot transmit HIV.
- You cannot get HIV from insect bites.
- You cannot transmit HIV by sharing cutlery, plates, glasses, or bedding.
- Sharing toilets and bathrooms is also safe.

Useful addresses

Muungano: peer group for people living with HIV
muunganoassociation@gmail.com
+32 (0)467/82.32.58

Sensoa vzw: : Flemish expertise centre for sexual health
President Building (Fifth floor)
F. Rooseveltplaats 12 bus 7
2060 Antwerp
03/238.68.68

AT4SH (All Together For Sexual Health):
sexual health promotion among African communities in
Flanders and Brussels
President Building (Fifth floor)
F. Rooseveltplaats 12 bus 7
2060 Antwerp
at4sh@sensoa.be

Sensoa positief: supports people living with HIV, their
families, and professionals who come into contact with HIV.
President Building (Fifth floor)
F. Rooseveltplaats 12 bus 7
2060 Antwerp
positief@sensoa.be
078/151.100

Vhiva: Discussion group for people living with HIV within the
Institute of Tropical Medicine
wmertens@itg.be
clamonte@itg.be

Lhiving vzw: an organisation that offers help to people who are chronically or seriously ill and in a difficult situation
Poolstraat 2, 1210 Sint-Joost-ten-Node, Brussel
info@lhiving.be

SIDA-IST Charleroi-Mons: Polyclinic Du Mambourg, Bd Zoé
Drion 1, 6000 Charleroi
071/92.54.10
065/822.755

Collectif des Femmes: Nyampinga
accueil@collectifdesfemmes.be
LLN: 010/47 47 69
BXL: 0489/80.26.71

Le SASER: The Emotional and Sexual Health and Risk
Reduction Service
Rue du Dr Haibe 4, 5002 Namur
saser@province.namur.be
081/77.68.20

Espace Mandela: Project within Plateforme Prévention Sida
(PPS; Sida Prevention Platform): a group of people living
with HIV who meet regularly
g.ntunzwenimana@preventionsida.org
0484/73.50.81

CAW: Centre for general welfare work
www.caw.be
0800/13.500

