



HOW DO I START?

DID YOU JUST LEARN THAT YOU'RE HIV-POSITIVE?

It can be very scary to learn that your HIV blood test came back positive, but it's not a death sentence. The test means that you are infected with the virus that causes AIDS, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Even though there is no cure for HIV disease, there are many new treatments that help keep the disease under control. Many people with HIV infection live a long and healthy life. No one can predict how long it may take to develop any symptoms of HIV disease.

When you first find out that you have HIV, you'll need to adjust to this change in your life. Family members or friends might be able to help you, or you could talk with a counselor or social worker. Take your time and don't feel that you have to tell everyone right away about your HIV status. Then start taking the next steps:

- Learn more about HIV disease.
- Keep track of your immune system.
- Decide how you want to deal with HIV.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HIV

HIV is a virus that can multiply rapidly in your body. Without treatment, HIV can make your immune system very weak. If this happens, you might get an "opportunistic infection". Common germs cause these diseases. People with healthy immune systems can be exposed to these germs and not get sick. The same germs can cause serious illnesses in people with weak immune systems.

The first medication for HIV was approved in 1987. Now there are many different drugs that can be used to slow down the HIV virus. Most people with HIV disease can now expect to live healthy lives for many years.

You will probably have a lot of questions about HIV disease. There are many good sources of information, including:

- your HIV case manager or health care provider
- the AIDS InfoNet (see the information at the bottom of this page)
- your local public health department

Be careful about the information you're getting – check it out with your health care provider or other sources to make sure it's accurate.

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

In addition to your regular medical exams, there are two special blood tests to keep track of HIV disease. They are the viral load test and the CD4 cell test.

The **viral load** test helps show how strong the HIV virus is in your body. It measures the amount of HIV in your blood. Lower levels are better. This test is used to help decide when it's time to start using antiretroviral medications (ARVs), to see if the drugs are working, and to know when to change medications.

The **CD4 cell test** helps show how strong your immune system is. It counts how many infection-fighting white blood cells you have. These cells are also called T-4, T-cell or T-helper cells. The more, the better. If your CD4 cell count gets too low, you might develop an opportunistic infection. This test is used to help decide when it's time to start using ARVs, or medicines to prevent opportunistic infections.

Your health care provider will probably want to do these tests every three to six months. If your viral load stays low and your CD4 cell count stays high, you might choose to delay treatment.

DECIDE HOW YOU WANT TO DEAL WITH HIV

HIV may not be the only health issue you are dealing with. The better your health is overall, the better you can deal with HIV. Be sure to get regular medical and dental checkups, and get treatment for conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. If you can avoid smoking, drinking too much alcohol, recreational drug use, and sexually transmitted diseases, you will probably find your HIV easier to control.

USING DRUGS TO FIGHT HIV

Although there are many different medications that can help slow down the HIV virus, we still don't know exactly when or how best to use them. You will need to get information and work with your health care provider to decide what kind of treatments fit best with your beliefs, desires, and life style. You might choose to be very aggressive, and use ARVs very early in your disease. You might be more conservative and decide to wait until you reach specific viral load or CD4 cell levels. It's up to you.

USING COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Some people believe they have stayed healthier because they use traditional healing practices, massage, acupuncture, herbs, or other therapies.

It is difficult to get information on how well these therapies work for HIV disease. Most of them are not studied the same way as western medicines. That doesn't mean they don't work, but you may have to find other ways to check them out. Remember, there are no "miracle" cures. If it sounds too good to be true, be very careful.

GETTING HELP

You can get help from a case manager at a local AIDS service organization. Check with your local health department. A case manager will give you confidential help to find out about and receive HIV/AIDS services.

You can also check on the Internet for HIV/AIDS information and services.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There are things you can do to stay healthier with HIV disease. You can learn more about the disease, monitor the health of your immune system, and decide how you want to deal with your health.

Remember, you are in charge of your own health care. You will decide which health care provider to work with, and whom else you want to consult about your treatments. You will decide which treatments you want to use and when you want to use them. Take your time and learn about your options.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The AIDS InfoNet has many fact sheets that can help you. These include fact sheets on antiretroviral therapies, CD4 and viral load tests, opportunistic infections, and living with HIV.

You can get copies of these fact sheets from your case manager, or from the InfoNet web site, <http://www.aidsinfonet.org>

Reviewed January 30, 2008