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Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

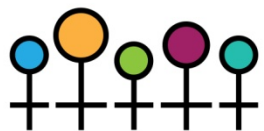
Last updated: November 8, 2024

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

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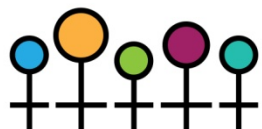


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Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment

- If you're living with HIV, **treatment with HIV drugs can improve your quality of life** and help you stay healthier longer
- ***Starting treatment is a big decision***





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Preparing for HIV Treatment

- To get the most benefit from HIV drugs, they **must be used just the way they are prescribed**
- Taking your treatment correctly is as important as which drugs you and your healthcare provider choose
- Before getting started, be prepared!
 - **The right healthcare provider**
 - **Enough knowledge about HIV**
 - **A positive attitude**

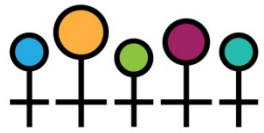


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Starting Sooner Rather than Later

The results of a study called **the START trial** have shown once and for all:

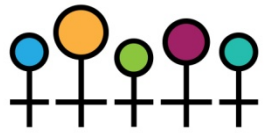
- **People living with HIV who start treatment early, while CD4 counts are still high, have a much lower risk of illness and death**
 - Including people living with HIV who feel well
- Taking HIV drugs earlier reduced likelihood of developing AIDS-related *and* non-AIDS related illnesses



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Consensus Statement

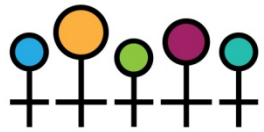
- Scientific experts and policy makers came together in July 2015
 - Issued statement declaring all people living with HIV should have access to HIV treatment as soon as they're diagnosed



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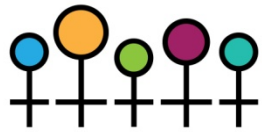
Benefits of Starting Early

- A longer life
- Having a higher CD4 cell count and keeping it high
- Preventing further damage to the immune system
- Decreasing risk of HIV-related and non-HIV-related health problems
- Reducing risk of transmitting HIV to others (***Treatment as Prevention or TasP***)
- No risk of transmitting HIV to sexual partners if on treatment and undetectable viral load (***U=U***)



Risks of Starting Late

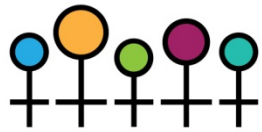
- A shorter life
- Severely weakened immune system
 - Can take longer to restore immune system to full strength
 - Can increase chances that people living with HIV will develop AIDS and other serious illnesses
- Greater chance of immune reconstitution syndrome
 - Can worsen infections when HIV drugs are started and CD4 count is low
- Passing HIV to others, including sexual partners and babies, if you become pregnant



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Treatment Guidelines

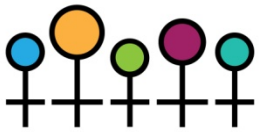
- Issued by a variety of global and national agencies
 - Written and reviewed regularly by HIV experts
- Guidelines on starting HIV treatment:
 - **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS):** All people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count
 - **World Health Organization and others:** Since September 2015 also recommend all people living with HIV should take HIV drugs, no matter their CD4 count



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The Right Healthcare Provider

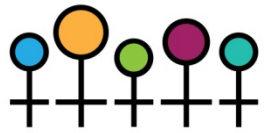
- Ideally:
 - You and your provider work as a team
 - You can choose among providers
 - Neither of these may be true, though
- Are **you and your provider a team?** Ask yourself:
 - Can I be totally honest with them?
 - Are they available when I have questions?
 - Do they take my concerns seriously?
- **If so, great!**



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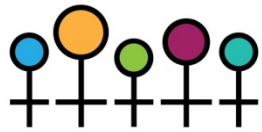
- Not feeling fully respected? Consider talking to your provider or **finding another** (if you are able to choose)
 - Being informed can help you with any provider
- Wise to have a provider who is an **HIV specialist**
 - May not always be an option
- To find HIV specialists near you:
 - Ask for suggestions from friends and/or ASOs
 - American Academy of HIV Medicine (AAHIVM)
 - HIV Medical Association (HIVMA)
 - International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care (IAPAC)



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Treatment Goals

- Get your viral load as low as possible for as long as possible
- Preserve, improve health of immune system by increasing the number of CD4 cells
- Improve quality of life and reduce illness
- Reduce risk of transmitting HIV to others

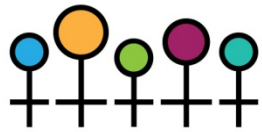


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Adherence

Taking drugs on schedule, as prescribed

- To get best benefits from HIV therapy, good adherence is required
- HIV drugs need to be kept at a certain level in your body
- Skipping doses, not taking drugs on time, not following food requirements can cause drugs to be less effective or stop working



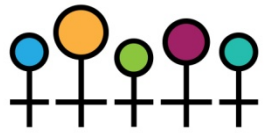
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Resistance

When a drug can longer fight HIV effectively

- If viral load goes up while taking HIV drugs, you should have a resistance test
- If your HIV develops resistance, you will likely have to change some drugs in your regimen

The best way to avoid **resistance** is to take your HIV drugs exactly as directed!

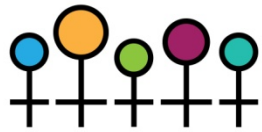


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A Positive Attitude

When you think about starting treatment, it's important to have a good attitude. May help to know that:

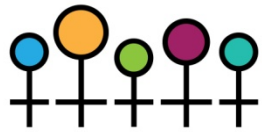
- Starting treatment is the right decision for you
- HIV drugs will help you fight the virus
- You **can** take your medications the right way



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A Positive Attitude

- **Think about why you're starting treatment**
 - To keep yourself in good health – for your own sake, and/or for the good of your family, friends, community
- You need not wait until your immune system is damaged before taking HIV drugs
- Newer HIV drugs are much easier on your body and have fewer side effects

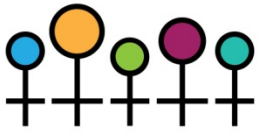


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A Positive Attitude

*When you think about starting treatment, it's **important not to go it alone***

- Put together a **support system** that may include:
 - Your healthcare provider
 - Social workers
 - Case managers
 - Family and/or friends
 - Support group of other people living with HIV
 - Online communities: The Well Project's *A Girl Like Me*



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Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, please read the full fact sheet:
 - [Considerations Before Starting HIV Treatment](#)
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
 - www.thewellproject.org
 - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
 - www.twitter.com/thewellproject
 - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv
 - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv