

HIV basics & treatment

Clear information about HIV, treatment and staying well

What is HIV?

What HIV is

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that affects the immune system – the part of the body that fights infections. Without treatment, HIV can weaken the immune system over time.

HIV vs AIDS

- **HIV** is the virus itself.
- **AIDS** (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a late stage of HIV infection, when the immune system is badly damaged and serious illnesses can develop.
- With today's treatment in the UK, **most people with HIV never develop AIDS**.

How HIV is passed on

HIV is passed on when enough of the virus gets into the bloodstream. This can happen through:

- **Sex without effective protection** (condoms or effective HIV treatment)
- **Sharing injecting equipment** (needles, syringes or other drug-use equipment)
- **From mother to baby** during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding **if there is no treatment**

How HIV is not passed on

HIV is **not** passed on by:

- Hugging, kissing or everyday contact
- Sharing cups, plates, cutlery or toilets
- Coughs, sneezes or saliva
- Sharing towels, bedding or seats
- Insects or animals

Modern HIV treatment

HIV is treated with medicines called **antiretroviral therapy (ART)**.

- Most people take 1–2 pills once a day.
- Treatment works by reducing the amount of virus in the blood.
- The aim is to make the viral load (the amount of virus in the blood) **undetectable**.

What “undetectable” means

- Blood tests measure the amount of HIV in a sample of blood – this is called the **viral load**.
- When treatment works well, the viral load becomes **undetectable** – too low for the test to find.

U=U – Undetectable = Untransmittable

- People who keep an undetectable viral load do not pass on HIV through sex.
- This is backed up by large international studies.
- U=U is one of the main messages about modern HIV treatment.

Staying well with HIV

With the right care and treatment, people living with HIV can expect:

- A normal life expectancy
- Good quality of life – work, relationships, sex and family life
- Regular check-ups with HIV clinic teams to monitor health and treatment
- Support with mental health, stigma, money and housing if needed

Looking after your health might also include:

- Stopping smoking, or cutting down
- Looking after your mental wellbeing
- Eating as well as you can and staying active
- Asking for support if things feel overwhelming

Where to find trusted information

For clear, up-to-date information about HIV and treatment:

- **aidsmap.com** – HIV treatment, U=U and everyday life with HIV
- **i-base.info** – detailed treatment information and question-and-answer service
- **tht.org.uk** – Terrence Higgins Trust: national HIV and sexual health charity
- Talk to your **HIV clinic team or Clinical Nurse Specialists** for advice about your own treatment.

Important note

This sheet gives general information only. Always speak to your HIV clinic team, midwife or doctor for personal medical advice about pregnancy, birth, feeding and treatment.