

What is adherence

Good adherence means taking all your antiretroviral medicines (ARVs) every day, at the right time and in the right way. Some may require to be taken with food.

Why adherence is important

1. When you take a drug, it gets processed by your body and enters into your blood stream. The HIV drugs (ARVs) need to stay in your blood at certain levels to fight HIV. If the level falls too low, the ARVs do not work properly.
2. When you take your ARVs on schedule, you keep the right level of the drug in your body and stop HIV from making copies of itself. This gives the immune system a chance to recover.
3. When you do not take your ARVs on schedule, you risk letting drug levels drop. This may allow HIV to make copies of itself and even make changes (mutations). These mutations can help the virus survive, even when you do take your HIV medication. This is called resistance.

When to start treatment

- As soon as you test positive for HIV infection.
- If you tested HIV positive a long time ago and were not eligible for HIV treatment at the time.
- If you stopped taking treatment at some point it is important to get back on treatment to avoid resistance.
- You are HIV positive and have TB.
- You HIV positive and are pregnant or breastfeeding.
- You are getting sick and your health care worker recommends that you should begin treatment.

Treatment is for life. Once you start taking treatment, you cannot stop. It is important to take your treatment correctly as directed, at the same time and every day.



If you don't feel ready, discuss the reasons with your health care provider who can give you accurate information and help address your concerns. It is important that you think about the following things:

- How many times a day must treatment be taken?
- How often should treatment be taken (every 12 hours, every 24 hours)?
- How many pills per dose are needed?
- Does it matter if they are taken with food or on an empty stomach?
- What are the side effects?
- Are there other drugs they cannot be taken with?
- Do they require refrigeration or other special handling?
- Do you have a medical condition that may make certain drugs unsuitable for you?
- Do you have other chronic conditions eg diabetes, that you take medication for routinely? You may want to discuss how to combine this with your ARV treatment.

It is important to make sure you really understand how to take each drug. This will help you be adherent.

It is a good idea to write down the answers to the questions listed above for each drug in your regimen. Then come up with a schedule for taking the drugs with times, number of pills, and any food requirements. Go over this with your health care provider to make sure everything is right.

Some drugs work best if they are taken with or without certain foods. Ask your health care worker about each of the drugs you must take. If one or more of your drugs needs to be taken with food,

find out if that means a full meal or if a snack will do. Some drugs can be taken with food, but not high-fat foods. Plan ahead so that the times you take your drugs fit in with your eating habits and correct food requirements.

It is also important to find out what to do if you miss a dose. This happens to everyone from time to time. When it does, follow your health care provider's instructions and then get right back on track with better adherence.

Side effects are an important factor when talking about HIV drugs. While all of the HIV drugs can cause side effects, not everyone will experience them. It is a good idea to find out what side effects to expect before you start your drugs. Then ask your health care worker how to manage minor side effects if they arise. Being mentally prepared can make side effects easier to manage if they occur. Most side effects improve in a few weeks.

If you do experience a side effect, don't just stop taking your pills. Follow the recommendations given by your health care provider. If the problem does not improve seek advice from your clinic.

Practical tips to improve adherence

- Believe that the medications will help you fight the virus and stay well. If you don't think so, you won't bother taking your pills correctly.
- Make taking your pills everyday at the same time part of your daily routine.

- Try to link taking your tablet to something you do daily like brushing your teeth or a specific television or radio show.
- Use a pill box, diary, cell phone reminder, or alarm to help you remember to take your medication.
- Plan ahead so that you don't run out of medication.
- Get a treatment supporter to assist you or remind you.
- Telling others who are supportive can also help – it is sometimes difficult to take the drugs when you are keeping your HIV-positive status a secret.

Starting ARV treatment early and staying on treatment improves your chances of living a long and healthy life.

For more information: www.hivsa.com



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What YOU need to know about...

HIV treatment adherence

