

HIV Viral Suppression and an Undetectable Viral Load: The Health and Prevention Benefits

Viral Suppression and Undetectable Viral Load: What Do They Mean?

If taken as directed, HIV medication can reduce the amount of HIV in the blood (also called the viral load) to a very low level. This is called viral suppression. Viral suppression helps to keep you healthy and prevents illness.

If the viral load is so low that it doesn't show up in a standard lab test, this is called having an undetectable viral load.



How Do You Get Your Viral Load to Undetectable and Keep It There?

People living with HIV can get and keep an undetectable viral load by taking HIV medication (called antiretroviral therapy or ART) every day, exactly as prescribed. Almost everyone who takes HIV medication daily as prescribed can achieve an undetectable viral load, usually within 6 months after starting treatment. But HIV is still in the body when the viral load is suppressed, even when it is undetectable. If a person stops taking HIV medication, the viral load will quickly go back up. People who have stopped taking their medication or who are having trouble taking all doses as prescribed should talk to their health care provider as soon as possible about how to get back on track.



Benefits

There are important health benefits to having a suppressed or undetectable viral load. People living with HIV who know their status, take HIV medication daily as prescribed, and get and keep an undetectable viral load can live long and healthy lives.

There is also a major prevention benefit. People living with HIV who take HIV medication daily as prescribed and get and keep an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV to their HIV-negative partners. This is often called "treatment as prevention."

Also, if a woman living with HIV takes HIV medication as prescribed throughout pregnancy, labor, and delivery, and if HIV medicine is given to her baby for 4-6 weeks after delivery, the risk of transmission from pregnancy, labor, and delivery can be reduced to 1 percent or less.



Talk with Your Health Care Provider

Talk with your health care provider about these benefits of HIV treatment and discuss which HIV medication is right for you. Stay in medical care so your provider can regularly monitor your viral load and make sure it remains undetectable. Also talk to your provider about ways to prevent other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Having an undetectable viral load only prevents transmission of HIV, not other STIs.

