A better pill to swallow

HIV treatment has come a long way! If you’ve heard scary stories about the HIV medications of yesteryear—handfuls of pills that need to be taken several times a day and cause unpleasant side effects—rest assured that newer drugs are far more effective, safer, easier to tolerate and much simpler to take. HIV treatment, and what we know about it, has changed dramatically in the past few years. You’ll be glad to know it’s largely a good news story!

“I had read blogs about atrocious side effects and met people from the early days of treatment who told horror stories of a time not-so-long passed. For me, this is what HIV treatment represented. As time went by, taking my meds became a part of my routine, as second nature as brushing my teeth or going to the bathroom. I realized that all of the fears I had had were no longer relevant, at least not for me.

When my viral load became undetectable, it gave me the sense of empowerment I had lost when I was first diagnosed. My fear and anguish dissipated and I felt more like the person I used to be.

Five years later, without having missed a dose, I don’t view taking my meds as a reminder of something negative but rather as something that gives me control over my health—for maybe the first time ever.”

—Jonathan

Several very effective HIV medications that are easy to take and have few side effects are available for all Canadians.

Not only have the medications themselves improved but so has our knowledge about treatment. In recent years we have learned that it is best for your health to begin treatment as soon as possible after being diagnosed. No more waiting around for the best time to start, no more weighing the pros and cons. Research has clearly shown that starting treatment early decreases your risk of developing serious illnesses. Starting treatment early is good for your long-term health and your lifespan.

And there’s more good news: We’ve also learned that continuous care and HIV treatment that keeps your viral load undetectable prevents the sexual transmission of HIV. In other words, if you see your doctor regularly and keep taking your HIV treatment so that your viral load stays undetectable (HIV is still in your blood but at levels too low to be detected by routine tests), you do not pass on HIV to partners during sex.

We also know that HIV treatment can greatly lower the risk of HIV transmission from an HIV-positive mother to her baby during pregnancy and childbirth, allowing HIV-positive women to have healthy pregnancies and give birth to HIV-negative babies. Research has also shown that treatment can help prevent HIV transmission for people who share equipment to use drugs.

So HIV treatment is good for you and for the ones you love. As someone living with HIV, starting and staying on treatment is one of the best things you can do for your health.

“Knowing your status is a good thing.... You’re still the same person you were before you were diagnosed. Get your meds and health in order and you’ll be doing better than the average person.”

—Jon
We have used the words *mother* and *woman* in this guide but we recognize that some people who can get pregnant and have babies do not identify as women.
Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

CATIE provides information resources to help people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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Information on safer drug use is presented as a public health service to help people make healthier choices to reduce the spread of HIV, viral hepatitis and other infections. It is not intended to encourage or promote the use or possession of illegal drugs.

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