



# It's all still possible

Starting points  
for living well  
with HIV



**Have you found out you have HIV and are trying to get your bearings? We can help you with the basics of living with HIV. Here's what you'll read about in this booklet:**

- **What is HIV?**
- **How you can stay healthy**
- **What your “CD4 count” and “viral load” tell you**
- **What you need to know about HIV treatment**
- **How you can avoid passing HIV to others**
- **Telling others you have HIV**
- **Next steps**



## What is HIV?

HIV is a virus that can weaken your immune system, your body's built-in defence against disease. HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus.

Without HIV treatment, you can eventually become sick with serious illnesses. Maybe you found out that you have HIV because you were sick with such an illness. But with proper treatment and care, most people with HIV can stay healthy and live a long, full life.

## So you found out that you have HIV...

The first thing you need to know is that these days people with HIV can live long and healthy lives, thanks to huge improvements in treatment and care. People with HIV on effective treatment can also have sex without passing HIV to their sex partners. And people with HIV can have healthy pregnancies and give birth to HIV-negative babies.

Even so, finding out you have HIV can be stressful. No matter how much good news there is, you might still have to work through the shock and other emotions you may be feeling, at your own pace, in your own way. (Or maybe you're feeling fine!)

Let's take it one step at a time. You don't need to become an expert; just knowing some of the basics about HIV can help you a lot. Understanding more about HIV will allow you to take charge of your health. And it can help you work with your doctor.

*"I'm OK! Being diagnosed was probably the worst part of the entire experience. From there, every day got a little bit better, and as my health improved, I felt better about the situation. Finding out that I tested positive was devastating but I read a lot about HIV and made a conscious effort to get as healthy as possible as fast as possible..."*

*Besides having to remember to take one pill a day, my life is virtually unaffected by the disease."*

*—Jon*

# How can I stay healthy with HIV?

**1 Get a good doctor.** If possible, find a doctor who has experience treating people living with HIV. If you can, find a doctor you can talk to openly and honestly.

When you have HIV, regular visits to your doctor will help you stay on top of your health.

Your doctor will likely suggest a complete medical checkup. Other health conditions (such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), hepatitis, diabetes or heart conditions) can affect your health, so it's a good idea to get tested for these as well.

**2 Start HIV treatment.** Today's HIV drugs are easier to take than older ones, and they can help you stay healthy. Effective treatment can also prevent HIV from being passed to others.



**3 Take care of your mental and emotional health.** Stress, depression and anxiety often go hand-in-hand with finding out you have HIV. There's no shame in any of this. Talk to your doctor, a counsellor or a therapist if you're struggling with mental health issues. Talking to another person who is living with HIV can also be helpful.

**4 Eat a well-balanced diet, exercise regularly and get plenty of rest.**

**5 If you're a smoker, try to quit smoking,** or smoke less. Talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about ways to help you quit smoking.

**6 Try to reduce or stop using drugs, alcohol or other substances** that could be harmful to your health. If you want help doing this, your doctor, community health centre or local HIV organization may be able to help.

*“What I try to tell people is that an HIV diagnosis is significant—it’s not something to trivialize—but if you get on effective antiretroviral therapy and we work on this together, you’ll be around well into old age. We’ll both be hobbling around my office together when we’re 102!... With effective treatment and ongoing care, HIV can be very manageable.”*

*—Dr. Lisa Barrett*

As part of your regular checkups, your doctor will recommend blood tests to monitor your health. Two of the most important tests check your **CD4 count** and your **viral load**.

## What is a “CD4 count”?

Your CD4 count tells you how your immune system is doing. The higher the number, the better.

CD4 cells are the “bosses” of the immune system. They lead the fight against invading germs and viruses. Your CD4 count tells you how many CD4 cells you have in a cubic millimetre (mm<sup>3</sup>) of blood. A normal CD4 count is anywhere from 500 to 1,500.

A low CD4 count puts you at greater risk of getting sick. Once you start HIV treatment, your CD4 count will likely rise, and many people on HIV treatment have normal CD4 counts.

## What is “viral load”?

Your viral load is the amount of HIV that is in your blood. The lower your viral load, the better.

If you are on HIV treatment and the treatment is working, your viral load will fall to a level too low for a test to detect (this is called an undetectable viral load). When you have an undetectable viral load, it does not mean that you’re cured or that the HIV is gone, but it does mean that your HIV is under control and that you cannot pass HIV to your sex partners.

## What do I need to know about treatment?

Treatment helps you stay healthy by stopping HIV from making copies of itself in your body. With treatment, your immune system can get stronger. HIV treatment can also prevent other health problems.

The sooner you start HIV treatment, the better it is for your long-term health. Research shows that people who start treatment soon after getting HIV and get good care can expect to live a normal lifespan.

Having an undetectable viral load also eliminates the risk of passing HIV to your sex partners. Similarly, when a person starts treatment before getting pregnant and maintains an undetectable viral load throughout their pregnancy, there is no risk of them passing HIV to their baby during pregnancy or childbirth.

Take HIV drugs as prescribed by your doctor. If you miss too many doses, the HIV in your body can become drug-resistant and the HIV drugs you’re taking will stop working. If this happens, you’ll have to change your drugs, which will leave you with fewer treatment options for the future.

Newer HIV drugs are much easier to take than older drugs, but some may still cause side effects. These often go away after a few days or weeks. Taking your medications with a meal sometimes helps. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist can suggest ways to manage any side effects. If side effects persist and make it difficult to keep taking your drugs, your doctor might be able to recommend other drugs that would be easier for you to take.

# How can I avoid passing HIV to others?

The great news is that there are many things you can do to avoid passing HIV:

## Take and stay on HIV treatment.

If you take HIV treatment and maintain an undetectable viral load...		
when you have sex	→	you will not pass HIV to your sex partners
during pregnancy and delivery	→	you will not pass HIV to your fetus or baby—as long as your viral load is undetectable before and during your pregnancy
if you use injection drugs and share needles or other equipment	→	you greatly reduce the risk of transmission

**Use condoms.** Condoms can prevent the transmission of HIV and other STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

If you use injection drugs, **use new needles and injecting equipment every time.** By not sharing needles or other injecting equipment, you reduce the risk of HIV and other infections.



**Feed your baby formula.** Canadian guidelines recommend using formula to feed your baby (instead of breastfeeding or chestfeeding).

**If you have an HIV-negative sex partner, they might be a candidate for PrEP** (pre-exposure prophylaxis). PrEP involves an HIV-negative person taking certain medications to avoid getting HIV. Your partner can talk to their doctor about it.

## Who should I tell?

Telling someone that you have HIV can be stressful. You may not be sure who you can trust or how a person will react. But it can also be isolating to keep it a secret. To help you decide who to tell, ask yourself:

- Who can I trust to listen and not judge me?
- Who can I rely on to give me the support I need and deserve?
- Who will respect my privacy?

Most of the time, telling someone (disclosing) you have HIV is your decision. You don't have to tell your family or friends, although if you think they might be supportive it could help you. In most cases you don't have to tell your landlord, employer, coworkers or school. You do not have to tell your dentist or other healthcare workers, but if they know, they might be able to provide you with better care.

In Canada you do have a legal obligation to tell your sex partner(s) that you have HIV in certain circumstances. In the past, people have been charged with serious crimes for not telling their sex partners about their HIV status before having sex.

With new knowledge about the prevention benefits of HIV treatment, the laws are evolving. For the most up-to-date information on when people living with HIV have a legal duty to disclose their HIV status, visit the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network at [www.aidslaw.ca](http://www.aidslaw.ca).

There's a lot to think about when it comes to disclosing your HIV—who to tell, how and when to tell. Talking to another



HIV-positive person can also be helpful. If you don't know another person who is living with HIV, contact CATIE or your local HIV organization and ask if they can connect you to an individual or group.

## Next Steps

Knowing the basics about HIV can help you tackle what comes next.

As far as “next steps” go, let’s break them down into a few main areas:

**Start HIV treatment.** If you’re not already taking HIV medications, talk to your doctor about starting as soon as possible.

**Learn more about how HIV is transmitted.** This will allow you to avoid passing the virus to other people.

**Get connected.** Find out about services for people with HIV in your area. If you picked up this brochure at a community-based HIV organization, talk to someone there. These places offer support and information and can help connect you with other people living with HIV. Talking to someone who has HIV or joining a group for people living with HIV can be a great way to deal with the stress of living with the virus.

To find a community-based HIV organization near you, visit **HIV411.ca**.

Know that there are people and resources out there to support you as you learn to live long and well with HIV.

*“HIV doesn’t define you. You define you. You can have HIV and still have an amazing life...”*

*Don’t be afraid to advocate for your needs... Reach out. You deserve support. Nobody should live in silence and isolation.*

*Know that you are not alone. There are many positive people out there waiting to support you. Get connected and engaged.”*

*–Brittany*

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## Disclaimer

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

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