

HIV & Treatment as Prevention

Understanding undetectable viral load (UVL)



The Facts

- HIV medication also called anti-retroviral therapy (ART) medication, is very effective and people living with HIV who take it regularly can live long and healthy lives.
- ART prevents HIV from reproducing in your body.
- Viral load (VL) is the measurement of how much HIV is detectable in your blood.
- When you take ART daily, your viral load may reduce. This means your body has less HIV in your blood and you are less likely to become unwell. This is also called 'viral suppression'.
- When your viral load is so low the test is unable to detect it, this is called 'being undetectable'. When this happens, you have an undetectable viral load (UVL).
- Having an UVL doesn't mean you are HIV negative, or that you have been 'cured'. You still have HIV in your body.
- A person living with HIV who takes ART and has had a UVL for six months, cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners. This is also known as Treatment as Prevention (TasP) or U=U. Studies have shown people with a viral load under 200 copies/mL cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners.
- A small number of people living with HIV will never be able to reach an UVL. Many of these people are on other medications for medical conditions, they may have ART medication resistance or ART drug toxicity. This can also occur if someone doesn't take their ART medications as prescribed by their HIV doctor.

A person living with HIV who takes their HIV medication as prescribed and has been able to maintain an undetectable viral load (under 200 copies/mL) for six months, cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners.



An undetectable viral load (UVL) only prevents HIV from being passed on through having sex.

What is a viral blip?

- Some countries like Australia have access to very sensitive testing, which can measure viral load as low as 20 copies/mL. These more sensitive tests may detect a small increase in your viral load from the previous time you had your viral load checked. This is called a 'viral blip'.
- A 'viral blip' is usually nothing to be anxious about, and your doctor will assure you of this.
- If your viral load is more than 200 copies/mL there is no need to worry or panic and you should talk with your doctor about what this means for you.

How do I know I have a UVL?

- You can find out what your viral load is, by asking your HIV doctor. For example, the doctor might say, "your viral load is undetectable", or "your viral load was 58 on your last blood test."
- When your viral load is under 200 copies/mL, you cannot pass HIV to sexual partners. Some people still use the term 'undetectable' for this reason even if your VL can still be counted.
- To maintain an UVL, you need to continue taking ART regularly as prescribed by your HIV doctor and continue to see your HIV doctor for regular scheduled appointments and blood tests every three to six months.

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When a UVL doesn't offer protection

- An UVL does not protect you from becoming pregnant or getting sexually transmitted Infections (STIs). To avoid pregnancy, you will need to consider your contraceptive options. Male or female condoms with water-based lube are the best way to prevent both unintended pregnancies and to reduce STIs.
- Having an UVL only ensures you don't pass on HIV through having sex.
- While the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV is significantly reduced with the effective use of ART and an UVL this does not eliminate the risk of HIV transmission through breast milk. There may still be a small risk that HIV could be passed from mother to baby through breast milk. It is recommended that mothers living with HIV in Australia are supported in their choices by their HIV doctor around their infant feeding options.
- Taking HIV medication during pregnancy and working together with your HIV healthcare team can reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to your baby.
- If you are a person living with HIV who injects drugs, it's important to always use new single use sterile needles and injecting equipment every time, and not share any equipment or needles.

Terms and Meanings

- ART = Antiretroviral Therapy. This is your daily HIV medication and can sometimes also be called HAART or Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy.
- Viral Blip = an unexpected detection of an amount of HIV virus in your blood.
- Viral Load = the amount of HIV that can be measured in a millilitre (mL) of your blood.
- Viral Suppression = when the HIV is no longer replicating in your blood.
- Undetectable Viral Load (UVL) = when the HIV virus in your blood is under 200 copies of HIV in each millilitre (mL) of blood.
- TasP = Treatment as Prevention. This is when the ART medication that you take helps you maintains a VL of 200 copies/ mL or below, which prevents HIV from being passed on to your sexual partners.
- Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U). This is a community campaign that educates people about the benefits of having an UVL. It is the same as TasP. Both are powerful tools highlighting the strategic role and contribution PLHIV play in ending HIV transmission.

For more information phone 02 9206 2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit www.positivelife.org.au

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The voice of all people living with HIV

