

## HIV/AIDS and antiretroviral therapy (ART)

### Who we are

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### Understanding what antiretroviral therapy is

Antiretroviral therapy (or ART) refers to the HIV medication used to treat HIV infection. These medications stop the virus from multiplying in a person's body. Antiretroviral therapy can delay HIV from developing into AIDS and can help people at all stages of HIV stay healthy and stronger for longer. It is important to remember that antiretroviral therapy is not a cure for HIV and AIDS.

### What is HAART?

HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) is a combination of three or more HIV medications. It is important to treat HIV with a combination of antiretroviral medications as this ensures that the virus is not given any opportunity to multiply.

### Understanding how antiretroviral therapy helps

Antiretroviral therapy stops the virus from multiplying and therefore stops the virus from destroying the cells of the immune system (CD4 cells), that protect our bodies against infections.

These HIV medications also reduce the risk of contracting certain infections that an HIV-positive person may be more vulnerable to, such as tuberculosis (TB), pneumonia and diarrhoea.

Antiretroviral therapy is good for a person who is HIV-positive. Many people with HIV who take antiretroviral therapy are able to lead longer, healthier lives. By taking the medication correctly, you can expect to feel well



and will be able to return to work or work for longer if necessary, thereby being able to support your family for longer.

Should a person stop taking their HIV medication, or not take them correctly, the HI virus will start increasing again.

### **Not everyone who has an HIV-positive test will take HIV medication**

One of the key blood tests your Healthcare Professional will do is a CD4 count. The CD4 count shows how healthy your immune system is. The higher the CD4 cell count is, the stronger your immune system is.

You should start antiretroviral therapy when you have a CD4 count of 500 or less and your immune system is weak or when you have certain conditions that require that you started on treatment.

### **Starting antiretroviral therapy**

It is important to remember that committing to antiretroviral therapy is a lifetime commitment. Since there are few medications available, working hand in hand with your Healthcare Professional is vital to fight the disease.

Working with your Healthcare Professional, counsellor, friends and family will make it possible for you to have a more positive outlook on life. Your life will be able to continue as close to what you know it, the only difference is that you have been diagnosed as being HIV-positive and you have made certain lifestyle changes to prevent the spread of the virus.

### **Antiretroviral therapy may make you feel sick**

As with any medication, taking HIV medication may make you feel sick. Some people get no or very few side effects, while other people may experience many side effects. Most side effects occur in the first few weeks or months after starting the medication, but some can take longer to develop.

Many of the side effects of antiretroviral therapy can be treated if found early. So it is very important to make sure you understand this before you take them. It is also very important to take the medication in the exact way that your Healthcare Professional states. If you feel unwell and think it may be because of the medication, visit your Healthcare Professional as soon as possible for them to find the reason for the problem.

The HIV medication may cause severe reactions in certain people which results in a need to be admitted to hospital. Fortunately this doesn't happen often and only affects a small number of people.

### **Where you can get antiretroviral therapy**

You need to visit your Healthcare Professional or local clinic. These are qualified Healthcare Professionals who will provide you with antiretroviral therapy if it is indicated for your condition.

### **You cannot stop antiretroviral therapy once you start**

To give the antiretroviral therapy the best chance to work against HIV, you must take the HIV medication every day for the rest of your life. This is no different to other chronic diseases such as diabetes or high blood pressure. If you take all the tablets at the correct time and in the correct way, they work better and you are less likely to get sick from infections.

Should you stop taking your HIV medication, your CD4 count will start to go down again which means you may get sicker.



Every missed dose of medication unfortunately provides an opportunity for the virus to fight back. When this happens the virus can become resistant to the medication. This means the medication no longer keeps the virus under control and HIV begins to spread in the body again. Your Healthcare Professional will talk to you about the benefits and problems of antiretroviral therapy.

### What about traditional medications and other natural remedies?

At the moment only antiretroviral medication that is registered with the Medicines Control Council of South Africa have been scientifically proven to repair the immune system once the CD4 count has dropped below a certain level.

All traditional and natural medication are not registered with the Medicines Control Council and still need to be proven to be effective in the treatment of HIV and therefore are viewed as experimental.

### Taking other medication with your HIV medication

If you are taking any medication, vitamins or supplements at all – whether bought at the pharmacy, given to you by a friend, family member, traditional healer or another Healthcare Professional who did not know you are on antiretroviral therapy – make sure you tell your Healthcare Professional.

This medication may work against HIV medication and may reduce the efficacy of the HIV medication or cause a dangerous reaction in your body. These also include some medication used as immune boosters.

### Disclaimer

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Members, who wish to approach the Council for Medical Schemes for assistance, may do so in writing to: Council for Medical Schemes Complaints Unit, Block A, Eco Glades 2 Office Park, 420 Witch-Hazel Avenue, Eco Park, Centurion 0157 or via e-mail at [complaints@medicalschemes.com](mailto:complaints@medicalschemes.com). Customer Care Centre: 0861 123 267/website [www.medicalschemes.com](http://www.medicalschemes.com)

