

Anti-retroviral treatment (ART) : answers to common questions / Khomanani.

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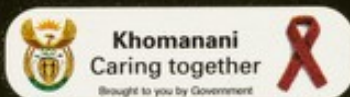
Caring together for life

Khomanani

Anti-retroviral treatment (ART)



Answers to common questions



What is anti-retroviral treatment (ART)?

Anti-retroviral treatment (ART) is a special combination of medicines for people with AIDS. These medicines, stop the HI virus from multiplying in a person's body. This stops the HI virus from killing the immune system cells – the cells that defend our bodies against infections.

Should every person who is HIV positive be taking ART medicines?

No, you first need to be tested to find out your HIV status. Your immune system will be measured by a CD4 count. You should start taking ART when you have a CD4 count of less than 200. This shows that the immune system is very weak. ART is only used by people who really need it. This is because, if started too early, the virus can find ways to get around the medicines. They may then become ineffective. HIV-positive people need ART because their immune system has become weak, or they already have an AIDS sickness.

Does ART cure a person with AIDS?

No, ART does not cure a person with AIDS. This is because the medicines do not kill the HI virus – they only keep the number of viruses down by preventing them from multiplying in the blood. But they cannot get rid of the virus altogether. If a person stops taking the anti-retroviral medicines, or does not take them properly, the HI viruses will start increasing again.

So does ART really work?

Yes, ART is effective in keeping people with AIDS fairly healthy. Many people with AIDS who are taking anti-retroviral medicines live and work normally for a long time. In countries that have been using ART for a long time, like Brazil, the USA and others, people with HIV live longer and healthier lives. These countries now have fewer deaths from AIDS.

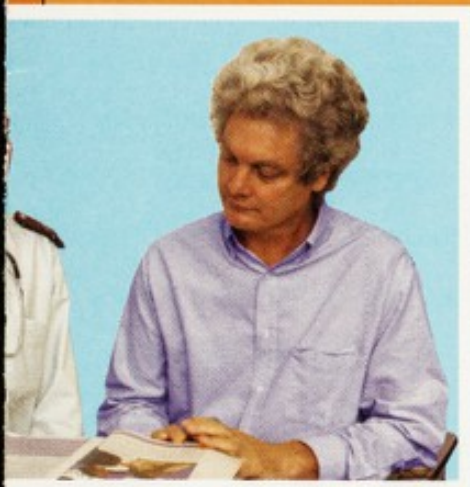


Are the medicines dangerous? Can they do more harm than good?

All medicines that we take have side-effects. This means that the person may feel sick from taking the medicines. Anti-retroviral medicines are very strong and they do have many side-effects. Many of the side-effects can be recognised and treated if reported early. So it is very important to make sure people understand how the medicines work before they take them. It is also very important to take the medicines like the doctor tells you to. People die from AIDS, but the medicines, if used properly, do not kill you.



Does that mean that a person on ART will not die?



No, but it means they could live a longer, healthier life. Some people who have AIDS cannot be helped by ART if they start treatment when they are already too sick. Some people do not take the treatment properly, or

stop because of side-effects. These people may then also get more sick, and may die sooner. However, ART medicines can even help people who are very sick with AIDS.

How often do you need to take the medicines, and for how long?

Doctors use different medicines to treat HIV and AIDS. Normally we use a combination of three different medicines, and these are taken twice or three times a day. Once you start taking ART, you need to carry on taking the medicines for the rest of your life. Sometimes the doctor will change the medicines. This is no different from illnesses like high blood pressure or diabetes which need life-long treatment.





Call the AIDS Helpline 0800 012 322
for more information.

Call the Red Ribbon Resource Centre
(011) 880-0405 for your free booklets on ART.

CONTACT STAMP

www.aidsinfo.co.za

Do people on ART still need to worry about safe sex?

Yes. An HIV-positive person can still pass on HIV even if they are taking ART. So they should still practise safe sex. Safe sex is important for everyone whether you are HIV positive or HIV negative, or on ART or not.



What can an HIV-positive person do to stay healthy if he/she is not ready to take ART?

There are many things an HIV-positive person can do to stay healthy. You can eat healthy foods, exercise regularly, stop smoking, and reduce alcohol intake. It is also important to find out about HIV and AIDS, to talk about how you feel, and to keep hopeful about the future. All of these things protect the immune system and help to keep you strong so that you will only need to start ART later. Talk to your health worker about ART – ask questions and find out as much as you can about the treatment.

How can we stop the spread of HIV?



Everyone in South Africa is at risk of getting infected with HIV if they practise unsafe sex. Just because ART is available, does not mean HIV is now not so serious. ARV medicines are not a cure for AIDS. So we all need to protect ourselves from getting infected with HIV. However, ART means that there is now extra hope for people with HIV or AIDS. But prevention is still the best way to stop HIV.

Why has it taken so long for the South African government to provide ART?

Until recently the cost of the ART medicines was very high, and so it was difficult for the government to provide ART to all the people who needed it. But the cost of these medicines has come down, and our health services have found ways to provide the ART.

However, it is still going to be a big challenge for our health services to provide ART to all people who require it in South Africa. We all need to support the programme, and also support people living with HIV and AIDS.





How soon can people with AIDS get ART from government hospitals and clinics?

Government will make sure that there is a service point in each health district by the end of the first year of implementation. By the end of the fifth year, every local municipality will provide this comprehensive package for HIV and AIDS management and treatment.

