

The Basics

Hearing the diagnosis of HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, is difficult. It's easy to feel alone and cut off from friends and family.

Some women, especially, may feel this way, because often they didn't know that they were at risk. And they didn't think women got HIV.

Actually, more than 1/4 of people diagnosed with HIV in the United States are women, and the number is rising. Anyone who is exposed to blood and body fluids can get HIV. Anyone having unprotected sex is at risk.

We'll look at what HIV is, how it affects women's health, what medications are available to control the virus, and some of the special considerations for women with HIV on highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART).

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV is a virus that is spread through contact with infected body fluids, like blood, semen, and breast milk. HIV is passed from one person to another through:

Sex, including vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, and oral sex

Sharing needles or other injection equipment

Pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding

Blood-to-blood contact

Once the virus is in your body, it starts making copies of itself. To do this, HIV uses your body's CD4 cells (T-cells), which are your body's defense against foreign invaders, like infections and diseases. This copying is called *replication*.

In the process of replication, HIV destroys CD4 cells. When enough of your CD4 cells are destroyed, your immune system will have trouble fighting off illnesses. This is called *AIDS*, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Some people show no symptoms, even though HIV is busy making copies in their bodies. Women, especially, may not have any severe symptoms in the beginning. That's why it is so important to get tested routinely, so that you can get the best care possible, as soon as possible.

HIV CAN BE DIFFERENT FOR WOMEN

Women may have different symptoms from men and may face different challenges. Here are some things you should know:

Women may have few symptoms of HIV in the beginning, and may be diagnosed late in the course of the disease.

—This may be one reason why HIV seems to sneak up on women and why it is important to be screened routinely for HIV and if you become pregnant.

Women tend to have lower viral loads and higher CD4 counts than men—but that doesn't mean that it isn't as serious.

Women may have gynecologic symptoms related to HIV, for example, more yeast infections, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), abnormal pap smears, and cervical cancer.

—It is important to see your gynecologist regularly to monitor these conditions.

Women may have different side effects from HIV medications than men.

—To learn more about side effects and how to cope, see the Patient Booklet *Women, HAART, and Side Effects*.

Women with HIV are more likely to feel sad or worried than men.

—If you're feeling sad, tell your health care provider. It is normal to feel sad when faced with difficult news and decisions. But when you're feeling sad, you may not take care of yourself like you should. Your provider can help.

Women tend to have more stress—more competing priorities—in their lives than men.

—If you're taking care of other people, it is extra important that you take care of yourself, too. That means making—and keeping—your health care appointments and taking your medicines daily. Stand up for yourself, and speak up when you need something.

DON'T PUT YOUR HEALTH IN THE BACKSEAT

Have you ever had one of those dreams that you're trying to drive a car while sitting in the backseat? It is scary and disorienting. You wake up and think, "Thank goodness that was only a dream."

Many women take care of other people's needs before their own—essentially putting their own health in the backseat. But in order to be there for your friends and family, you need to put yourself in the driver's seat.

Take care of yourself, so that you are there to take care of the ones you love.

Be open and honest with your provider about the competing priorities in your life and the challenges you face. Together you can figure out the best way for you to stay healthy and stay in the driver's seat.

IF I HAVE THE VIRUS, WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

If you have HIV, the best thing you can do for yourself and for the people you care about is to see a provider who has experience treating women with HIV. Together you and your provider will figure out what's best for you and your situation.

The most effective treatment for HIV is called HAART. HAART does not cure HIV or make it go away, but it can slow down the replication and spread of the virus in your body and help prevent the virus from destroying your immune system, which protects you from getting sick.

HAART is actually a combination of 2 or more drugs, called *antiretroviral medications*, or ARVs. It is also called *cART*, or combination antiretroviral therapy, or just plain *ART*. The idea behind HAART is to attack HIV at several different points in its life cycle and to keep attacking so that HIV can't make so many copies.

There are 5 different groups of ARVs, and each attacks HIV in a different way. Combining drugs from different groups increases the chance that the treatment will work. Your provider will choose a combination especially for you.

Although HIV and HAART affect women in some ways that are different from men, women who take their medicine as directed may actually have a better chance than men to live a long and full life despite HIV.

To increase the chances of stopping the virus from replicating, HAART combines 2 or more medications that halt the process at different steps in the HIV life cycle.

