

Undetectable = Untransmittable (U = U)

Frequently Asked Questions

A resource for healthcare providers to discuss U=U with their patients.

1. Can a person living with HIV who is on treatment with an undetectable viral load transmit HIV to a sexual partner?

No. There is effectively no risk of sexual transmission of HIV when an HIV positive person on antiretroviral medications (ART) maintains an undetectable or suppressed viral load. (1, 2)

2. What is an undetectable viral load?

Viral load refers to the amount of HIV in a blood sample taken from a person living with HIV for laboratory testing. Generally, the higher the viral load, the more likely you are to transmit HIV. ART can reduce a person's viral load to the point where it is so low that it cannot be detected by measurements. (3) At the Roy Romanow Provincial Laboratory in Saskatchewan, an undetectable viral load is less than 40 copies/mL and this result is reported as "target not detected". (1)

If you maintain an undetectable viral load or viral suppression (<200 copies/mL), your HIV is under control, even though ART does not fully clear the virus from your body. Getting and keeping your HIV under control is the best thing people living with HIV can do to stay healthy. (11)

3. When is a viral load considered 'undetectable'?

"Undetectable" means that the laboratory test cannot detect virus in the sample of blood taken from a person living with HIV as a result of taking ART regularly. Most people will achieve an undetectable viral load within 6 months of starting ART. Regular viral load testing is critical to confirm that you have achieved and maintain an undetectable viral load.

4. What is the evidence that sexual transmission does not occur when HIV is under control?

The conclusion is based on a number of research studies in which the HIV positive persons were on ART and their HIV was under control, including: PARTNER, HPTN 052, Opposites Attract, and the Swiss Statement. (4, 5) In the PARTNER study, there were ZERO transmissions of HIV out of 58,000 condomless sex acts between serodiscordant couples. In the most recent study called Opposites Attract, there were no transmissions out of 17,000 condomless sex acts between men. (5, 6)

5. Is the risk zero?

The risk is "negligible", which means there is effectively no risk of transmission through sex. Keeping your HIV under control with ART prevents sexual transmission of HIV.

6. Does everyone who starts HIV treatment become and remain undetectable?

Nearly everyone who takes their HIV treatment daily will achieve an undetectable viral load within 6 months. (7) About 1 in 6 people will need additional time to find the right treatment due to

tolerance and adherence issues. Taking medications every day as prescribed and regular viral load monitoring are essential to maintaining an undetectable viral load.

7. How often should viral load testing be done?

Regular viral load testing is currently recommended every 3 to 6 months for people who have a stable undetectable viral load. (8) This may need to be adjusted for each individual person, in discussion with their health care practitioner.

8. Is U = U a good strategy for everyone?

Not everyone can utilize U = U as their best prevention strategy. Access to adequate healthcare, treatment, and viral load testing are serious barriers in many parts of the world. Some people who have access to treatment may choose not to be treated or may not be ready to start. Others start treatment but have challenges with adherence for a variety of reasons such as stigma, mental health challenges, substance abuse, unstable housing, hostile environments, drug resistance, or intolerable side effects. There are other effective options such as consistent use of condoms and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which can be used in combination or separately, to prevent HIV transmission.

9. What is pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)?

PrEP is the use of HIV medications to keep HIV negative people from becoming infected. Taking these medications daily prevents HIV from being able to take hold and spread throughout the body. PrEP is available to anyone who may be at risk, free of charge, in Saskatchewan.

10. Is PrEP 100% effective in preventing HIV transmission?

Daily PrEP reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by more than 90%. Your risk of getting HIV from sex can be even lower if you combine PrEP with condoms and other prevention methods. (12)

11. What does this mean for me if I have HIV?

It means that if your viral load is undetectable and you stay on HIV treatment, you can be confident that you will not transmit the virus to others. However, if you want to stop using condoms, it is important to discuss this with your partner and ensure they agree with the decision. (9) It is important to remember that while an undetectable viral load will protect your partner from HIV, it does not protect them or you from other sexually transmitted infections, or prevent pregnancy.

12. Do I need to disclose my HIV status to my sex partner if I am undetectable?

U = U has not had an impact on HIV laws in Canada. A person living with HIV in Canada still has a legal duty to disclose their HIV status to a sex partner in certain circumstances. (10)

For more information about HIV disclosure law in Canada, see:

http://www.aidslaw.ca/site/wpcontent/uploads/2014/09/CriminalInfo2014_ENG.pdf

13. Can I trust that my partner is really undetectable?

Just like you cannot tell if someone has HIV by looking at them, you also cannot tell if someone has an undetectable viral load by how they look. Whether or not you choose to trust your partner is a highly personal decision and is likely to depend upon your sexual practices and relationship circumstances. People engaged in consensual sex are responsible for their own sexual health. In some instances, PrEP is an excellent option to empower yourself against HIV transmission.

14. What are some other considerations if you are HIV +, or your partner is HIV + and you are HIV -?

There are always risks when choosing the best method to prevent HIV transmission. Drug resistance can occur when a person has been on a medication for a long time. This could cause a person's viral load to go up without them knowing it, and cause their partners to be at high risk of being infected with HIV. It is important for persons living with HIV to have their viral load tested routinely to ensure that it is remaining undetectable.

Having an undetectable viral load does not protect you or your partner from other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Using condoms greatly reduces the risk of transmission of other STIs. Other STIs also increase the risk of HIV transmission and infection.

15. Does U = U apply to transmission through needle sharing?

U = U does not apply to HIV transmission through needle sharing. There is not enough research yet to draw a conclusion. Using new, sterile injection equipment every time is important to prevent HIV transmission, as well as other blood-borne infections such as hepatitis C. Contact your local Public Health Office to get information on where to obtain sterile injection equipment.

Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV and its treatment. (copied from CATIE document "The Power of Undetectable")

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