

HIV 101

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

HIV attacks the body's immune system. Unlike other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV completely. So once you are diagnosed with HIV, you have it for life. If left untreated, HIV can prevent the immune system from fighting off infections and diseases. People with HIV that take their medications every day can live as long as people without HIV.

Viral Load

A viral load measures how much virus is in the blood (HIV viral load). A goal of HIV treatment is to keep a person's viral load so low that the virus is "undetectable" when a test is performed.

→ **Low viral load = good**

CD4 Count

A CD4 count measure the number of CD4 cells (T cells) in the blood. CD4 cells are infection-fighting cells of the immune system. Naturally, HIV destroys CD4 cells. A goal of HIV treatment is to get a person's CD4 count as high as possible to prevent infections.

→ **High CD4 count = good**

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

AIDS occurs when a person's CD4 count drops below 200. At this point, the immune system is very weak and unable to fight off infections. Just because a person has HIV, doesn't mean you have AIDS. A person may live their entire with HIV and never have AIDS.

Benefits of Starting HIV Therapy

Studies have shown that HIV therapy can help to decrease viral load, increase CD4 counts, and reduce the risk of viral transmission. Medications for HIV also help to reduce risk of infections and diseases. Research has proven that HIV therapy can lead to prolonged life expectancy compared to those not on HIV therapy when the person takes the medication as prescribed. Once a person is put on medications, it is very important to take every dose, every day, at about the same time. This is also known as adherence.

