

HIV care continuum - HIV/AIDS 101, part 8

The HIV care continuum, sometimes called the HIV treatment cascade, refers to the steps of care that people living with HIV go through from first being diagnosed to having no measurable HIV virus in the body.

The four stages of the continuum are:

1. HIV testing and diagnosis.

The HIV care continuum begins with a diagnosis of HIV infection. The only way to know for sure that someone is infected with the HIV virus is to get an HIV test. People who don't know they are infected don't get the treatment they need to stay healthy. They can also pass the virus on to others without knowing it.



2. Getting and staying in medical care.

Once someone is infected with the HIV virus, it is important to be under the care of an HIV healthcare provider. They can offer treatment and prevention counseling to help you stay as healthy as possible. Good regular care will also help prevent you from passing HIV to others.



3. Starting antiretroviral therapy.

Antiretrovirals are HIV drugs that are used to keep the virus from making more copies of itself. Antiretroviral therapy or ART is the treatment for everyone with an HIV infection.

There are six classes of HIV drugs. ART involves using three or more antiretroviral drugs from at least two HIV drug classes. These medicines must be taken exactly as prescribed, called medication adherence, to control the virus. Treatment with ART can help people with HIV to live longer, healthier lives. ART also greatly reduces the spread of HIV.

4. Achieving viral suppression.

By taking ART regularly, you can get to a very low level of HIV in your blood. This is called viral suppression. Having no virus detected by a "viral load" test does not mean that the virus is completely gone from your body. It is just that it is below what a lab test can find. But lowering the amount of virus in your body with medicines can help you to stay healthy and live longer. It also greatly reduces your chances of passing HIV to others.

Be sure to get answers to any questions you have about HIV/AIDS. Your public health department, health care provider, and public library can help.



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