

## Viral Load

### What is "viral load"?

When healthcare providers discuss your "viral load," they are talking about the level of HIV in your blood.



Knowing your viral load helps your provider to monitor your HIV disease, decide when to start treatment, and determine whether or not your HIV medications are working. Viral load testing looks for the number of virus particles in a milliliter of your blood. These particles are called "copies."

The goal of HIV treatment is to help move your viral load down to *undetectable levels*. In general, your viral load will be declared "undetectable" if it is under 40-75 copies in a sample of your blood.

### Changes in viral load



Your viral load changes over time. Typically, after you are first infected with HIV, your viral load will be extremely high—sometimes numbering in the millions in one

blood sample. But your immune system responds and eventually brings your viral load back down. In general, your viral load continues to remain at low levels early in the course of your HIV disease. It does begin to increase over time, however.

### Viral Load Testing—When and How Often?

Your HIV healthcare provider will probably order a viral load test at your

first visit after you are diagnosed, in order to establish a baseline level. After that, you will probably have a viral load test every 3–6 months, before you begin a new HIV medication, and 2–8 weeks after starting or changing therapies.



### Viral Load and Transmission of HIV

Studies have found that having a low viral load greatly decreases the risk that you will pass HIV to someone else through sexual contact.

But **having a low viral load does not guarantee that you won't transmit HIV**. Even when the viral load is undetectable, HIV can still exist (in semen, vaginal and rectal fluids, breast milk, etc,) so you should continue to take steps to prevent HIV transmission.



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

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