Overview of HIV treatment - HIV medicines, part 1

HIV is treated by using a group of medicines to fight HIV infection. This is called antiretroviral therapy or ART. ART involves following an HIV regimen, which means taking a number of HIV medicines every day, exactly as written on the label.

The virus attacks and destroys the infection fighting cells called CD4 cells. CD4 cells are part of the immune system. Loss of CD4 cells damages the immune system and makes it hard to fight off infections and some HIV-related cancers.

HIV medicines prevent the virus from making copies of itself and multiplying. This lowers the amount of HIV in the body. Having less HIV in the body gives the immune system a chance to recover.

Even though there is still some HIV in the body, the immune system is strong enough to fight off infections and certain HIV-related cancers. By reducing the amount of HIV in the body, HIV medicines also reduce the risk of spreading HIV to others.

ART should be taken by everyone with HIV. ART should be taken no matter how long they’ve had the virus or how healthy they are. If someone with HIV does not take ART, the virus will attack the immune system and lead to AIDS. That is the last stage of HIV infection.

There are many HIV medicines available to make up an HIV regimen. These medicines are grouped into six drug classes according to how they fight HIV.

A person’s first HIV regimen usually includes three or more HIV medicines from at least two different HIV drug classes.

Some HIV medicines are available as combination pills, which are two or more different HIV medicines combined in one pill.

When choosing an HIV regimen, people with HIV and their health care providers consider the following:

- Other diseases that the person with HIV may have
- Possible side effects of HIV medicines
- Possible reaction between HIV medicines or between HIV medicines and other medications the person with HIV is taking
• Results of drug-resistance testing that shows that some HIV medicines might not be effective against a person’s strain of HIV.

• How easy the ART regimen is to take. For example, a regimen that has two or more HIV medicines combined in one pill is easy to follow.

• Anything that can make it hard to follow an HIV regimen. For example, a busy or unpredictable schedule can make it hard to take HIV medicines on time.

• High cost of HIV medicines

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.