

Seeing an HIV Health Care Provider

I just tested HIV positive. What should I look for in a health care provider?

Look for a health care provider who has experience treating HIV and AIDS. You may want to see a specialist in HIV.

You need a health care provider with whom you feel comfortable. You will be working closely together to make many decisions regarding your treatment.

What can I expect at my first health care provider visit?

Your health care provider will ask you questions about your health and lifestyle, do a physical exam, and order blood tests. Your health care provider will also discuss what it means to have HIV and how it might affect your life. Your first visit is a good time to ask your health care provider questions.

What questions should I ask my health care provider?

Ask your health care provider about:

- The benefits and risks of HIV treatment
- How HIV treatment may affect your lifestyle
- Lab tests used to monitor HIV infection
- How to avoid getting other infections
- How to avoid transmitting HIV

Write down your questions so you remember them when you visit your health care provider.

What tests will my health care provider order?

You will have three very important blood tests at your first medical appointment: a **CD4 count**, a **viral load** test, and **drug-resistance testing**.

- The **CD4 count** measures the number of CD4 cells in a sample of blood. CD4 cells are infection-fighting cells of the body's immune system. HIV destroys CD4 cells, making it hard for the body to fight off infections. Because the CD4 count indicates the level of HIV damage to the immune system, the test is key to deciding when to start HIV treatment. A goal of treatment is to prevent HIV from destroying CD4 cells.
- A **viral load** test measures the amount of HIV in a sample of blood. A goal of HIV treatment is to keep a per-

son's viral load so low that the virus can't be detected by a viral load test.

- **Drug-resistance testing** identifies which anti-HIV medications will or will not be effective against a person's strain of HIV.

Your CD4 count, viral load test, and drug-resistance testing results will provide an initial measure of your HIV infection before you start treatment. Once you start treatment, your health care provider will compare future test results with your initial results to monitor your HIV infection.

Your health care provider may also order other tests, such as a blood cell count, kidney and liver function tests, and tests for **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)** and other diseases.

When will I begin HIV treatment?

Starting HIV treatment is a big step. When to begin treatment depends on your health and your readiness to take a combination of anti-HIV medications (a **regimen**) every day. Once you begin taking anti-HIV medications, you will probably need to take them for the rest of your life.

Your health care provider will help you decide if you are ready to start treatment. (See the [When to Start Anti-HIV Medications](#) fact sheet.) Once you start treatment, your health care provider will help you find ways to stick to your treatment regimen. (See the [Treatment Adherence and Following an HIV Treatment Regimen](#) fact sheets.)

Terms Used in This Fact Sheet:

CD4 count: The number of CD4 cells in a sample of blood. A CD4 count measures how well the immune system is working.

Drug-resistance testing: Testing to identify which anti-HIV medications will or will not be effective against a person's specific strain of HIV. Drug-resistance testing is done using a sample of blood.

Regimen: A combination of three or more anti-HIV medications from at least two different drug classes.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs): Infections that are usually passed during sexual contact.

Viral load: The amount of HIV in the blood. One of the goals of antiretroviral therapy is to reduce viral load.

What happens if I don't start treatment right away?

If you don't start treatment right away, you should have a CD4 count and viral load test once every 3 to 6 months. Your health care provider will use the test results to monitor your infection and help you decide when to start treatment.

For more information:

Contact an *AIDSinfo* health information specialist at 1-800-448-0440 or visit <http://aidsinfo.nih.gov>. See your health care provider for medical advice.