

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a single, light blue, oval-shaped pill between the thumb and index finger. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a medical professional in a white coat.

# Get the Facts About HIV Medicines

If you have HIV, it's important to start taking HIV medicines as soon as you can. HIV medicines are called **antiretroviral therapy (ART)**. For most people, ART involves taking pills every day.

**Sticking with your treatment plan is the best thing you can do for your health. ART can't cure HIV, but it can help you lead a long, healthy life.**

## How do HIV medicines work?

ART stops HIV from multiplying (making copies of itself) so that there's less of the virus inside your body. The amount of HIV in your body is called your **viral load**. When your viral load is low, it helps your immune system fight infections so you can stay healthy.

If your viral load is so low that a test can't find any HIV in your body, it's called an **undetectable viral load**. This means there's almost no chance you can pass HIV to other people.

If you don't take your HIV medicines, even once in a while, your viral load can increase very quickly. Following your treatment plan also helps prevent **drug resistance**. Drug resistance is when the virus in your body changes so much that your HIV medicines don't work anymore.

**Talk with your doctor if you're having trouble following your treatment plan** — they can make changes to your plan to make sure it's working for you.

### HIV medicines and pregnancy

If you have HIV and you're pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, it's important to start taking HIV medicines right away. If you take your medicines exactly the way your doctor tells you to, your chance of passing HIV to your baby is very low.





## How can I remember to take my HIV medicines?

Try taking these steps to help you remember to take your pills:

- **Make a routine** to help you take your pills at the same time every day. For example, if your doctor tells you to take a pill every morning with food, try taking it at breakfast every day.
- **Use a pillbox** with containers for each day of the week. This makes it easy to figure out if you took your pills for the day yet.
- **Set an alarm or use a free app on your phone** to remind you to take your pills every day.
- **Set up automatic refills at your pharmacy** so that you won't forget to request a refill — and so you won't run out of pills.

There's also **a newer HIV medicine** that you get as an injection (shot) once a month. Talk to your doctor to learn more about this new treatment.

## Do HIV medicines cause side effects?

HIV medicines cause side effects in some people. Side effects can include:

- Feeling sick to your stomach, throwing up, or diarrhea
- Having trouble sleeping
- Dry mouth
- Headache
- Rash
- Feeling dizzy
- Feeling very tired

**Talk with your doctor if you have any side effects.** Your doctor might change your HIV treatment plan or prescribe medicine that can help with your side effects.



## Other medicines, vitamins, and supplements

It's important to tell your doctor about any other medicines, vitamins, dietary supplements, or herbal remedies you're taking. That's because they can interact with your HIV medicines. When this happens, your HIV medicines may not work as well or you could have side effects.

## How do I get HIV medicines?

You'll need a doctor or nurse to give you a prescription for your HIV medicines. If you already have a primary care doctor (a doctor who manages your regular health care), they may be able to prescribe HIV medicines. If they don't know a lot about HIV, they can refer you to an HIV specialist.

There are other ways to find an HIV doctor, too. You can:

- Go to [locator.hiv.gov](https://locator.hiv.gov) and enter your city, state, or ZIP code
- Call your state's HIV/AIDS hotline — you can find the number at [hab.hrsa.gov/get-care/state-hiv-aids-hotlines](https://hab.hrsa.gov/get-care/state-hiv-aids-hotlines)

## How do I pay for HIV medicines?

If you have health insurance, check with your insurance company to see what your plan covers.

If you need help paying for your HIV medicines:

- Go to [locator.hiv.gov](https://locator.hiv.gov) to find a Ryan White clinic (the **Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program** is for people who need help paying for HIV treatment and care)
- Check out [findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov) to look for a health center that charges people based on what they can pay

To learn more about HIV, visit:  
[nlm.gov/guides/HIV-AIDS-Online-Resources](https://nlm.gov/guides/HIV-AIDS-Online-Resources)