

Key Points

- Antiretroviral therapy (ART) is the use of HIV medicines to treat HIV infection. ART involves taking a combination of HIV medicines (called an **HIV regimen**) **every day for life**.
- ART is recommended for people infected with HIV whose immune system has been weakened. We can determine the strength of your bodies immunity with a test called **CD4 test**. ART can't cure HIV, but it can help people infected with HIV live longer, healthier lives. ART also reduces the risk of **sexual transmission** of HIV.
- Potential risks of ART include side effects from HIV medicines and **drug interactions** between HIV medicines or between HIV medicines and other medicines a person is taking. Poor adherence—not taking HIV medicines **every day and exactly as prescribed**—can lead to **drug resistance**, which is another risk of ART.

ART should be started early in HIV infection to prevent infections related to a weak immunity. In Malawi, ART is recommended for:

- All **pregnant and breast-feeding women**, even if they are healthy. This decreases the risk to the baby and keeps mom healthy too!
- All adults who have a **CD4 less than 500 cells**
- HIV patients who have developed certain **HIV-related illnesses**
- All HIV-infected **children less than 5 years** of age, even if they appear healthy

Getting Started

Being diagnosed HIV positive can be very frightening but there is a lot of reason for HOPE! With the treatments now available, HIV is a very treatable condition with a high likelihood of success. Everything that you planned to do with your life is still an option: completing schooling, having children, seeing your children grow up and start families of their own. Successful treatment is a **PARTNERSHIP** between your doctor and health providers, you as the patient and your family and friends. If all are doing their part, we expect that you will have a long and full life.



Getting well

Many patients do not realize they have HIV until they have gotten ill, usually with infections that came because the immunity was weak. The first goal is to get you better from your initial infection. This may require antibiotics or other medicines. Tuberculosis (Tb) and other infections won't improve unless they are identified and treated. Once you seem to be getting well, the doctor may suggest that it is time to start on the ARV medicine. This is usually within 2 weeks or less of finding you need ART.

Living positively

There are many things that you can do to be sure that you stay healthy with HIV

- Eat a balanced diet (especially including green vegetables and low fat proteins like fish and chicken)
- Avoid excessive alcohol and stop smoking
- Get regular exercise, 7-9 hours of sleep each day and reduce stress
- Have a good balance of work and home life and maintain a positive attitude.
- Get support from friends, family and clergy
- Be sure that your sexual partner is also tested for HIV and use condoms correctly and consistently.

Starting ART (antiretroviral therapy)

Be sure that you get all of your questions answered by your health provider. Find out about the side effects to the medication and when you should report back for follow up. The most common forms of ART in Malawi are:

5A (tenofovir/lamivudine/efavirenz) know elsewhere as Atripla

How is it taken? One tablet at bedtime each day (with or without food)

What if I miss a dose? Missing more than 1-2 tablets in a month can lead to early treatment failure. It is better to take the tablet 1-2 hours late than to miss a dose. If you remember the morning after, the tablet is likely to make you drowsy through the day and you should wait until evening. Consider setting a reminder on your phone or watch and engage your family in helping you remember.

One pill, once a day....it's that easy!



Possible side effects-Most people tolerate this medicine well without any side effects. Some patients may experience the following:

- **Dizziness** (chizungulira)-This nearly always goes away within a week.
- **Sleep disturbance**-Some notice restless sleep or strange dreams for the first few days on the medicine.
- **Kidney problems**-Although most patients don't have any symptoms initially, for some the medicine can effect the way your kidneys
- Some may experience minor **stomach (GI)** side effects. Most of these will also go away in a few days.

2A-(zidovudine/lamivudine/nevirapine). There are times that 5A may not be the best choice for your treatment and your doctor may recommend an alternative.

How is it taken? One tablet in the morning, one tablet in the evening (with or without food). 2A requires a **starter pack** in which you take a slightly different pill in the morning than in the evening for the first 2 weeks

Possible side effects

- **Anemia**-some may develop a low blood count and will have to change to another medicine.
- **Liver problems** or **skin rash** are also seen in a few patients.

Bactrim/Cotrimoxazole prophylactic therapy (CPT)

Most HIV+ patients will be prescribed a daily antibiotic called Bactrim. It helps to protect you from certain infections during the time that your immune system is weak. Rarely, people will develop an allergic reaction/rash to this medicine and may have to take an alternative medicine.