



YOUR GEMS HIV GUIDE 2024

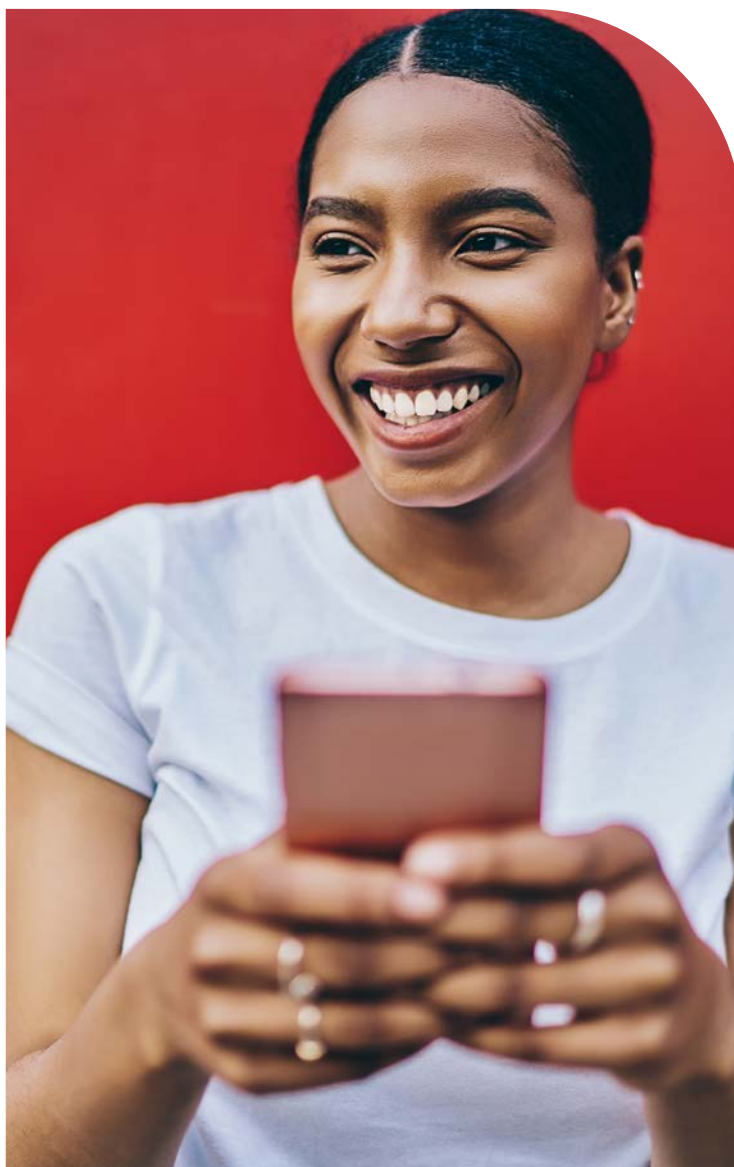
Learn more about HIV,
how to protect yourself
and your loved ones,
why you should know your
status, and how GEMS
can help with testing
and treatment.

DISCOVER THE
BRILLIANCE
OF **GEMS**



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What you need to know about HIV

IN THIS SECTION:

- What HIV is and whether it can be cured.
- How HIV is transmitted.
- How you can protect yourself from HIV.
- How to test for HIV.
- What HIV does to the body.
- How HIV is treated.
- The relationship between HIV/AIDS and TB.



What is HIV and can it be cured?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that diminishes the body's natural defences/immune system. The immune system is the human body's natural defence against infections and diseases.

Immunodeficiency means that the immune system, which is the body's main method of fighting infections has been placed at risk. It is important to remember that any defect in the immune system decreases a person's ability to fight infections. For example, an immune-deficient individual will get more frequent infections and heal more slowly or may not heal at all.

After being infected by the virus the immune system begins to progressively fail, leading to life-threatening, opportunistic infections (such as cryptococcal

meningitis), inflammatory conditions (such as immune reconstitution inflammatory syndrome), tumours (such as kaposi sarcoma) and cancers (such as cervical cancer). People living with HIV who are not on treatment or who default on their treatment may develop AIDS, leading to poor health and death due to opportunistic infections associated with the progressive failure of the immune system.

Current medications can dramatically improve the health of people living with HIV and delay the disease progression from HIV infection to AIDS. They need to be taken daily for the rest of a person's life. Antiretroviral treatment increases the life expectancy of people living with HIV by stopping the virus from multiplying, thereby allowing the body to restore itself.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is mainly transmitted through exposure to body fluids from an infected person. The virus is present in blood and genital secretions (sperm and vaginal secretions). It can also be transmitted from breastfeeding mothers to their babies, if the mother is not on Effective Antiretroviral Treatment (ART). Sexual transmission accounts for most infections, but the following can all result in infection:



Unprotected sexual intercourse with an HIV-infected partner.



Contact with infected blood; for example, sharing contaminated needles, using a razor blade from an infected person, or having skin-piercing procedures (for example, tattooing) if the tools are commonly shared.



From mother to child during pregnancy, during the delivery of the baby and thereafter through breastfeeding.



Please remember that it is impossible to transmit the virus through casual kissing, shaking hands, hugging, sneezing, sharing the same seat or bed, using the same shower or toilets, or sharing eating utensils.

How can I protect myself from HIV?

You can reduce the risk of HIV infection by limiting exposure to risk factors, as follows:

- Abstain from sex until you are ready – young people are more vulnerable to HIV infection because of the societal pressure that leads to risky behaviour.
- Be faithful to one partner.
- Always use a condom during sexual intercourse.
- Screen for and treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as they enhance the risk of HIV transmission through genital ulcers or infections.
- Speak to your doctor about prescribing pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for you if you do not have HIV but are at a very high risk of contracting it. Taking PrEP will reduce your chances of contracting HIV.
- Speak to your doctor about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV infection if you do not have HIV but are at very high risk to getting HIV.
- Take emergency HIV pills, called post-exposure prophylaxis, when you believe you may have been exposed to the virus within the last 72 hours. This significantly reduces the risk of being infected.

- Undergo safe male circumcision performed by a trained healthcare professional.
- Use sterile injecting equipment, including needles and syringes if injections are needed for medical reasons, for example insulin injections for diabetics.
- Avoid drug and alcohol abuse as these are known to increase risky behaviour.

What would put me at greater risk of getting infected?

- Having sex with a partner whose HIV status is unknown.
- Unprotected (no condom) vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- Multiple and simultaneous sexual partnerships.
- Untreated sexually transmitted infections.
- Men who are not circumcised and practise risky sexual behaviour.
- Injecting drugs with contaminated needles and syringes.
- Accidental needle-stick injuries at work, particularly among healthcare workers.



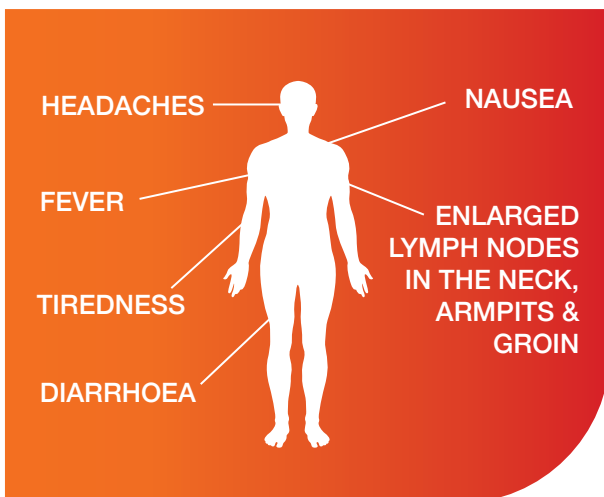
A baby of an HIV-positive mother who is not on effective treatment will also be at particular risk of infection.

How do I test for HIV?

In the early stages of infection, HIV often causes no symptoms, and the infection can only be diagnosed by testing a person's blood.

The only way to be sure of your HIV-negative status is therefore to have an HIV test done within 72 hours after exposure or sexual encounter to allow for PEP if required, then have a repeat HIV test done after 4 - 6 weeks. You can read more about testing on [page 8](#).

Although many people do not develop any symptoms when they first become infected with HIV, some will get a flu-like illness within three to six weeks after exposure to the virus. This illness may include:



During this period, the quantity of the virus in the body is high and the disease may spread to different organs, particularly the lymphoid tissue. At this stage, the infected person is more likely to pass on the infection to others.

Some people may experience symptoms within a few months, while others may be symptom-free for five to seven years or longer. However, even during the symptom-free period, the virus will be actively multiplying, infecting and destroying cells of the immune system.



What does HIV do to the body?

The role of the immune system is to defend our body from germs. A key element of the immune system is your CD4 cells, a type of white blood cell. CD4 cells are like soldiers in that they protect your body from germs and help you to deal with most infections. In a healthy person the normal CD4 cell count is between 500 and 1500 cells in each millilitre of blood. The CD4 count is usually reported per cubic millimetre (mm^3).

When a CD4 cell is infected with HIV, it is transformed into a virus factory. The infected CD4 cell produces new HIV viruses. All new viruses are then released

into the bloodstream where they look for other CD4 cells to infect.

When a CD4 cell has been circulating in the body for a while, it is destroyed. After being infected with HIV, more and more CD4 cells are destroyed. This is when the immune system loses the battle and eventually breaks down. When the CD4 count goes below 350 CD4 cells/mm^3 , the body loses its natural defences to fight germs. A person is considered to have AIDS when the CD4 count drops below 200.

How is HIV treated?

Although there is currently no cure or vaccine for HIV infection, there are effective medicines called antiretroviral therapy (ART), commonly known as antiretrovirals (ARVs). When taken properly, ARVs can improve general health, quality of life and increase life expectancy. You can read more about ARVs on [page 13](#).

What is the relationship between HIV, TB, and AIDS?

TB

Tuberculosis (TB) is one of the most common opportunistic infections associated with HIV. TB is mainly spread from one person to another when contaminated droplets in the air from someone's cough or sneeze are inhaled.

TB usually affects the lungs but can also be found in other parts of the body. It is important to start TB treatment as soon as possible. Without treatment, TB can spread to other parts of the body through the bloodstream.

Common symptoms of TB

- Coughing, sometimes with mucus or blood
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Unintentional weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Night sweats
- Cognitive decline, e.g. confusion or forgetfulness
- Deterioration of sight
- Joint pains in extrapulmonary TB (in other words, TB outside the lungs)

If you suspect you have any of the above symptoms, please consult your doctor.

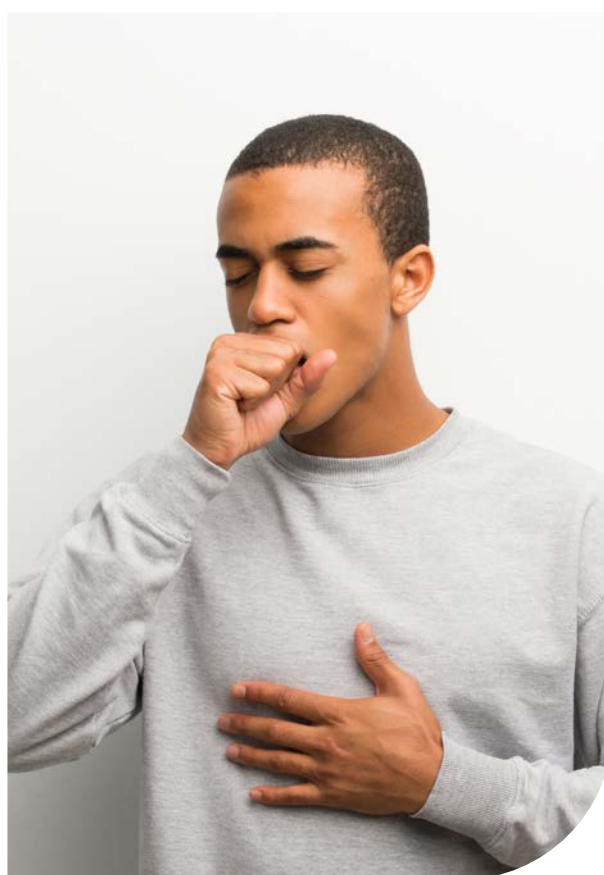
AIDS

When the body's immune system finds it difficult to fight against HIV, the person becomes more prone to serious infections and diseases. This means they have progressed to 'acquired immunodeficiency syndrome', commonly known as AIDS.

Early signs and symptoms of AIDS

- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck, behind the ears, under the arms or in the groin
- Thrush
- Painful skin rashes
- Sores on the lips that do not heal

The person becomes more susceptible to opportunistic infections that take advantage of the body's severely compromised immunity. Opportunistic infections are caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites that are normally controlled by the immune system, including TB, cryptococcal meningitis, pneumonia, and certain cancers.










How GEMS covers HIV testing and treatment



What HIV benefits are offered by GEMS and how can I access them?

GEMS offers comprehensive preventative care and screening benefits to all members. A full list is available on the [GEMS website](#). These include the following HIV benefits:

PREVENTATIVE/SCREENING BENEFITS	HIV BENEFITS
 <p>SCREENING TESTS*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIV counselling and testing • TB screening • Pap smear 	 <p>GP consultations, including HIV counselling and testing</p>
 <p>VACCINES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B vaccine (1 per lifetime) • Flu vaccine (annually) • Pneumococcal vaccines (every 5 years for at-risk beneficiaries) • Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine 	 <p>Blood tests (CD4, viral load, liver function, kidney function)</p>
	 <p>Antiretroviral treatment (authorisation required)</p>
	 <p>Registration on the HIV disease management programme (DMP), which includes the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT), Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) programmes.</p>
	 <p>Specialist Consultations**</p>

* Screening tests can be done by your doctor, at occupational health (wellness) clinics in your workplace, and during GEMS wellness days.

** Members on the [Tanzanite One](#) and [Emerald Value](#) options require a referral from a network GP for Specialist consultations.

Testing and counselling are covered on all options, without registration on the HIV Management Programme. Should you or one of your registered beneficiaries wish to access the full range of benefits for people living with HIV, you will need to register on the HIV Management Programme. See how to enroll in the next section.

Know your HIV status

IN THIS SECTION:

- Who should test for HIV, how often, and why?
- What type of counselling must take place before and after an HIV test?
- Can I be forced to have an HIV test?
- How the HIV test will be done.
- How confidential will my test results be?
- Can I relax if my test results are negative?



Who should test for HIV, how often, and why?

Ideally, everyone should know their HIV status. However, some people are at more risk of infection than others. Testing is recommended if –

- You think you may have been exposed to HIV.
- You are sexually active.
- You have experienced a sexually transmitted disease.
- You have engaged in unprotected sexual activities with one or more partners.
- You are a healthcare worker with direct exposure to blood.
- You are pregnant or want to fall pregnant and want to avoid potentially transmitting the virus to your baby.

How often should I be tested?

- Within 72 hours (3 days) after possible HIV exposure and three months thereafter.
- If you engage in risky sexual behaviour, you should continue to have yourself tested on a regular basis (for example, every six months or every year).
- Before or during pregnancy.

Benefits of HIV testing

- Prevention of transmission of the infection to others.
- Access to treatment early enough to avoid developing AIDS.
- The ability to live a healthy life.
- The ability to make informed choices.

What type of counselling must take place before and after an HIV test?

There is still considerable stigma and discrimination attached to HIV/AIDS and you should be aware of the emotional trauma and the possible consequences a positive test could bring about. For these reasons, HIV testing cannot be done without counselling.

Counselling is the process of giving professional assistance and guidance before (pre-counselling) and after (post-counselling) the HIV test. During counselling, you can address your concerns, fears or any questions related to HIV. The counselling sessions are face-to-face meetings, held in a private consultation room.

Pre-test counselling

The counsellor should provide you with the following information before the HIV test:

- The benefits of testing.
- The potential risks, such as discrimination and abandonment.
- How the test is performed.

- A guarantee of confidentiality.
- The assurance that testing is voluntary.

The counsellor should also:

- Ask you why you want to be tested. It might be that you just want to know your HIV status, or that you have engaged in risky behaviour, placing you at risk of being infected with HIV.
- Ask if you have been tested for HIV before.
- Explain to you how HIV is transmitted.
- Ask how you will handle the outcome of the test, regardless of the result.

Pre-test information for women who are or may want to become pregnant includes:

- Risks of transmitting HIV to the baby.
- Measures that can be taken to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.
- Benefits of early diagnosis and treatment of HIV to the baby and mother.



Post-test counselling

All individuals undergoing HIV testing must be offered counselling when their test results are given, whether positive or negative. The result must be given in person to the individual by a trained counsellor.

The purpose of the post-test counselling session is:

- To make sure that the test result is understood by the person tested.
- To inform that person of the next steps they need to take to stay healthy and help prevent the spread of the virus.

If you have tested negative, the counsellor will:

- Explain the test result to you, including information about the window period*.
- Recommend that you re-test in three months' time if you have recently engaged in risky behaviour.
- Give you basic advice on ways to prevent HIV transmission.
- Provide you with male or female condoms and guidance on their use.

If you have tested positive, the counsellor will:

- Provide you with psychosocial support to cope with the emotional impact of the test result.
- Help you to identify support structures, whether it is through a partner, a family member, or a support group.

Can I be forced to have an HIV test?

HIV tests should always be voluntary; no one is allowed to force you to have an HIV test done, and you must give consent for an HIV test before it may be done.

It is important that you read and understand what is written on the consent form. It usually states that:

- You have had a pre-test counselling session.
- The HIV test has been explained to you.

* What is the window period?

The window period is a term used to describe the period between HIV infection and the production of antibodies. It takes 15 days to three weeks for the body to produce antibodies. During this time, an antibody test may give a 'false negative' result, which means that the test is negative even though the person is actually infected with HIV and is highly contagious at this time.

- Help you to find treatment, care, and prevention services.
- Discuss whether you want to disclose your result to your loved ones, and if you do, when and how to do so.
- Provide information on other relevant preventative health measures such as good nutrition and the use of medicines to prevent infections.
- Arrange a specific date and time for follow-up visits or referrals for treatment, care, counselling, support, and other services that are appropriate.
- Refer you for additional tests to assess the stage of your infection. Among these tests are the CD4 count and viral load.

The counsellor will also:

- Provide you with information on how to prevent the transmission and spread of HIV.
- Provide you with male or female condoms and guidance on their use.

In some cases, it can also require your authorisation for the counsellor to:

- Contact you after the testing and counselling session.
- Give your contact details to GEMS.

You do not have to sign a consent form agreeing to have an HIV test if you feel you need more time to think about it, or if you have any unanswered questions.

How will the HIV test be done?

Rapid HIV antibody tests are generally used for the day-to-day diagnosis of HIV in adults. They are called 'rapid' as the results are available within 10-20 minutes.

Simple finger pricking is used to obtain a drop of blood, and the blood is tested using a special testing device. This is quicker and less painful than taking blood from a vein and sending it to the laboratory.

How do antibody tests work?

- When a person is infected with HIV, the body responds by producing special proteins that fight the virus, called antibodies.

- An HIV test is used to detect the presence of these antibodies in blood or saliva.
- If antibodies to HIV are detected, it usually means the person has been infected with HIV. Most people develop detectable HIV antibodies within three months of being infected.

If an HIV test is positive, a second (confirmatory) test of a different type must be done. If this test is also positive, it will confirm that the HIV result is positive, and there will be no need to do another test. If the confirmatory test is negative, the results are called 'discordant'. A full blood test (HIV ELISA) must then be performed at a laboratory.

How confidential will my test results be?

Counsellors all sign confidentiality clauses and they are not allowed to disclose any information about your HIV status to anyone (for example, your employer, partner, or family) without your consent. This means that you do not have to tell anyone your HIV status unless you prefer to do so.

Can I relax if my test results are negative?

Even if your HIV test results are negative, you need to be aware of the following:

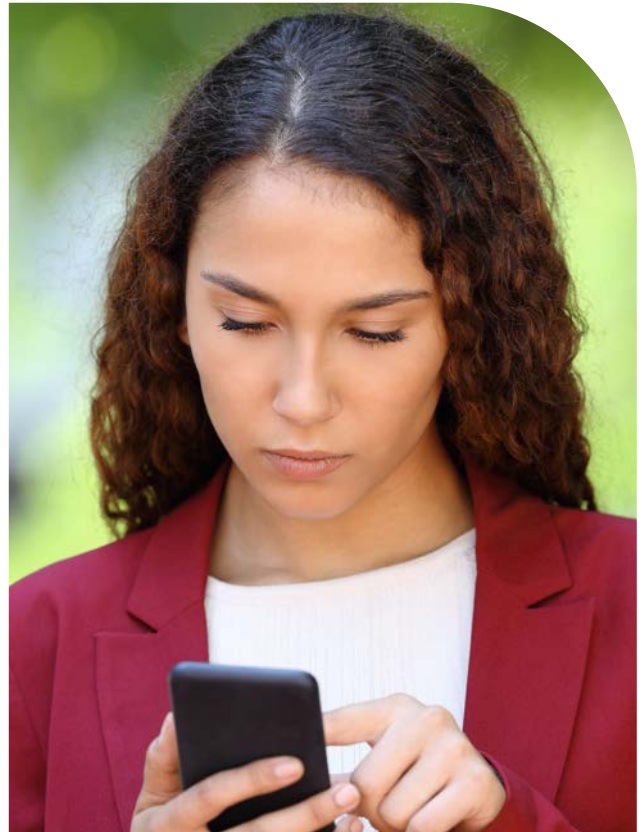
- HIV tests should be done regularly, especially if you are at any risk of infection.
- Certain behaviours can minimise your risk of infection – refer to [page 4](#) for more information.
- Even if your test is negative, it does not mean that your partner is also negative. Encourage him or her to be tested, too.
- If you engaged in risky behaviour in the six weeks before the test, you may be in the window period where you are infected, but your test shows a negative result. This window period lasts between 3 and 6 weeks so it is important to consider retesting after this.



Next steps if you've tested positive

IN THIS SECTION:

- Can a positive test result be wrong?
- What does a confirmed positive test result mean?
- What treatment will I typically receive?
- How can the GEMS HIV Management Programme help?
- How can I enroll on the GEMS HIV Management Programme?



Can a positive test result be wrong?

If your first HIV test was positive, a second (confirmatory) test would have been done to confirm the result as HIV-positive. Only if you have had two positive results, will you be diagnosed as being HIV-positive, and no further tests will be needed to confirm the diagnosis.

What does a confirmed positive test result mean?

Two positive HIV tests mean that you are infected with HIV. However, it does not mean that you have AIDS, nor is it a death sentence.

Most people living with HIV find it easy to treat and manage themselves. ARVs can give you a normal life expectancy and an excellent quality of life. If you take your medicine and live positively, your quality of life

will improve and you will live a longer, healthier, and more productive life.

However, because a person living with HIV is infected for life, you must remember that you can pass the virus to others by having unprotected sex, or by sharing needles or equipment for the usage of drugs. A woman living with HIV can also pass it on to her unborn or breast-fed baby.

If you are diagnosed with HIV



Get help from your partner, friend or relative.



Disclose your status to your sexual partner(s) so they can also be tested.



Learn about the disease.



Take care of your health.

The next section offers more advice on living well with HIV.

What treatment will I typically receive?

Although there is no cure or vaccine for HIV infection yet, ARVs are highly effective in combatting the effects of HIV. They prevent the virus from multiplying, which allows the body to restore and strengthen its immune system. When taken properly, these medicines can improve general health and quality of life and increase life expectancy.

In general, individuals are given a Fixed-Dose Combination (FDC) of three different antiretroviral medicines. These are combined into one pill to make it easier for a patient to swallow. The treatment is adapted to suit the needs of each individual and is prescribed by a family doctor or general practitioner (FP) or general practitioner (GP). HIV treatment is permanent and lifelong. It is effective if the person is committed and consistent in taking medicine on time, and every day. Your doctor will monitor the efficacy of your treatment by assessing you every six months, or more frequently if necessary.

Like most medicines, ARVs can cause side effects. These unwanted effects are often mild but can

sometimes be more serious and can impact the health or quality of life of the individual. These side effects vary from person to person, and it is impossible to predict how each individual will be affected. The side-effects include:

- Diarrhoea
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Rash
- Changes in weight and/or fat distribution

It is essential to report any side effects during your appointment with your doctor. Do not stop your ARVs without first consulting your doctor. Most side effects are transient, and your doctor can give advice and provide medication to manage the side effects until they improve.

Some opportunistic infections are preventable through drug therapy (such as antibiotics). This is known as prophylactic treatment. Your doctor will determine the need for prophylactic treatment.





How can the GEMS HIV Management Programme help?

If you or one of your registered beneficiaries enroll on the programme, you will receive the support you need to lead a healthy and productive life, with access to the following benefits:



Medicine to treat HIV (ARVs).



Access to a specially trained medical team who will review your details and consult with your doctor to ensure that you receive the most appropriate treatment for your condition.



Medicines to treat and prevent opportunistic infections, including multivitamins where appropriate. (Note that a doctor's script and pre-authorisation is required for all medicines, including multi-vitamins.)



Reminders to go for regular check-ups and tests to monitor the state of your health and update your treatment where necessary.



Pathology tests (all blood tests related to monitoring and diagnosing your condition as per your care plan).



Treatment to prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child (including treatment for the baby).



Regular monitoring of your condition to ensure that you start treatment at the right time, that your treatment is effective and that you are compliant.



Advice for an HIV-negative partner planning to have a baby with an HIV-positive partner.



Clinical support and guidelines for your treating doctor.



Treatment to prevent the transmission of the virus if you should accidentally expose any of your HIV-negative dependants or if you are HIV-negative and you are exposed to infected bodily fluids.

How can I enroll on the GEMS HIV Management Programme?

Enrolling is simple, and the sooner you (or any of your registered beneficiaries) do so after a positive diagnosis, the better. Your information is kept strictly confidential since the programme is managed by a team of health professionals and is run separately from other GEMS programmes and your employer.

You can use any of the channels below for more information on the programme, to ask for an application form to enroll, or for contact details of treating doctors in your area:



Call 0860 436 736, from Monday to Friday between 8:00 and 17:00 and Saturday from 8:00 to 12:00.

OR



Send a 'please call me' or an SMS with your name and contact number to 083 843 6764 and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

OR



Email hiv@gems.gov.za

Next steps

Visit your treating doctor, who must examine you and complete your **application form** to join the GEMS HIV programme. You will need to sign the application form and your doctor should submit it to GEMS by email to hiv@gems.gov.za, or by fax to the confidential toll-free fax number 0800 436 732.

As soon as your application has been received and approved, you will be notified via your preferred method of communication (SMS, post, or email). You will then be able to access the relevant HIV medical care benefits.



How to live well with HIV

IN THIS SECTION:

- What are the key things I should do if I am HIV-positive?
- What lifestyle habits can help me manage my condition?
- How can I make the best of my ARVs?
- How can I protect others from HIV?



What are the key things I should do if I am HIV-positive?



Find a support system

Find friends, family members and/or counsellors who will be supportive, to help you adjust and learn to live with HIV.



Learn more about HIV

The more you know about HIV, the better you can use the information to help you stay healthy and strong.



Go for regular check-ups

- Regular check-ups can identify illnesses that can be treated, so don't wait until you become ill to go for a check-up. Preferably see your doctor at least twice a year.
- Get your CD4 cell count and viral load (VL) tested regularly, as prescribed by your doctor.
- Get weighed regularly to monitor and manage any changes in weight.

What lifestyle habits can help me manage my condition?



Rest and relax

- The body needs extra rest. Aim to sleep for eight hours every night.
- Rest whenever you are tired.
- Find healthy ways to cope with stress as it can harm your immune system. Counselling is a great support if you are worrying or have problems.
- Relax with people you love, your family, children, and friends.
- Do things you enjoy, such as listening to music or reading a newspaper or book.



Exercise

Exercise regularly (at least three times a week) to help:

- Keep your mind healthy.
- Keep your body strong.
- You sleep better.
- Improve your appetite.
- Relieve stress.

Eat well

The food you eat is particularly important in determining the strength of your immune system and whether you stay healthy or not. 'Eating well' means eating a range of different foods every day that will help keep your body healthy.

A healthy diet should provide enough:

- Vitamins (found in fruit and vegetables).
- Minerals (found in foods such as pumpkin seeds, fish, nuts, spinach, fruit, and vegetables).
- Carbohydrates (found in grain and cereals).
- Proteins (found in meat, fish, dairy, beans and legumes and other foods).



Avoid unhealthy habits

Alcohol, recreational drugs, and smoking can weaken your body by breaking down immune cells.

- Minimise alcohol intake, as it can make ARVs less effective, reduce your appetite and lead to risky behaviour.
- Avoid smoking because it increases the risk of illnesses such as pneumonia and certain cancers.
- Avoid using recreational drugs as they may weaken the immune system.



How can I make the best of my ARVs?



Start ART as soon as possible after diagnosis

Research has shown that the sooner ART is started, the better the prognosis for anyone living with HIV, regardless of their CD4 count at diagnosis. Starting ART immediately or soon after diagnosis has been associated with a healthier and longer life, and limits transmission of the virus to others.



Be compliant

Compliance is the key element for treatment success. This means adhering to your treatment plan, not missing doctors' appointments, doing laboratory tests as required (usually twice a year), and taking all the prescribed medicine consistently and as instructed by your doctor or pharmacist. It also means being committed to a healthy lifestyle.

The social stigma associated with HIV can result in non-compliance, as some HIV-positive individuals are afraid to be rejected by their partners, family, colleagues, or friends if they find out about their HIV-positive diagnosis. They will not go to the clinic or fetch their medicine at the pharmacy because they fear that someone could disclose their status to other people they know. Defaulting, or not taking your medication, can result in an increase in HIV viral load and a reduced CD4 count, leading to a compromised immune system which can no longer properly fight off infections such as TB and thrush, and other medical conditions such as cancer.



Take your ARVs exactly as prescribed

If you are not compliant with your ARV treatment as prescribed, the virus becomes resistant to the medication. This means that the medication is less effective at fighting the virus and will thus need to be changed. There are a limited number of ARVs that can be used to treat HIV infection, so it is best to avoid developing a resistance to your medication. This will mean that your doctor could have other treatment options available at a later stage, if needed.

Taking your ARVs every day at the right time and in the right way keeps optimal levels of the medication in your bloodstream, which will prevent the virus from becoming resistant to your medication. Use your watch or cellphone alarms to help you to remember to take your medicine.



Use cost-effective generic alternatives to avoid unnecessary co-payments.

Generic medication has the same molecule, dose and strength to the original, but is manufactured by different companies. Generic medications are generally cheaper than the original branded medication. If you have any questions regarding cost-effective generic medication, your pharmacist will be able to assist.



Take ARV pills with food and liquids

- Food can reduce the nausea caused by some pills.
- Some pills are better absorbed when taken with food.
- Do some gentle exercise (such as stretching or going for a short walk) before eating, to increase your appetite.



Notify your doctor if you missed taking your medicine, or if you have side effects

Missing your medicine can result in HIV becoming resistant to ARVs. If you miss an ARV dose on a rare occasion, it will usually not result in failure of the treatment. However, if you frequently miss or skip doses of your ARVs, the virus may develop resistance to the treatment and will become ineffective.

In some instances, it may be necessary to make changes to your ARV medication, such as if you experience significant side effects to certain medications. Because most side effects disappear within a few weeks after starting treatment, your doctor may first encourage you to continue with the original treatment for some time. Your doctor may also opt to change your treatment if the side effects are severe, or don't improve with time.

How can I protect others from HIV?

If your partner is HIV-negative

- Consistently practise safe sex, e.g. using condoms.
- Take all your medicine, always on time, to help lower the viral load (measurement of the amount of virus in blood) in your body fluids and decrease the chance of transmitting HIV to your partner.
- The recommendations for serodiscordant couples (where one partner is HIV-positive and the other one is HIV-negative) include offering antiretroviral treatment to the HIV-positive partner as early as possible (discuss this with your treating doctor, especially if you want to plan a pregnancy).

Things you should do

- Be responsible when having sex. Use condoms correctly and consistently. This is the safest way to avoid the transmission of STIs and will help you to avoid contracting a different strain of HIV.
- If you are pregnant, use condoms every time you have sex, even if you and your partner are already living with HIV. This will prevent you from being re-infected.
- Before and during pregnancy, talk to your doctor about taking ARVs to reduce the risk of transmission of HIV to your baby. Also discuss feeding options. Inform the GEMS HIV Disease

Management provider and register on the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission programme (PMTCT).

- Tell your partner(s) that you are living with HIV as this provides them with the opportunity to support you and protect themselves. It can be difficult to tell your sexual partner(s), but they need to know so they can also get tested and seek the support they may need.
- Tell your potential sexual partner your HIV status so that you can agree on practising safe sex.
- If you are a man and had sex with a woman who became pregnant (even if you are not the father), you need to tell the woman so that she can get early medical care for her own and her baby's health.

Things you should NOT do if you are HIV-positive

- Do not share razors or toothbrushes. HIV can be spread through fresh blood on such items.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, or organs.
- Do not share needles for injecting drugs. Seek help if you inject drugs, as you can better fight HIV if you are free from such an addiction or practise harm reduction techniques such as using clean needles and syringes.



Get in touch

GEMS HIV Management Programme



Call
0860 436 736



Please call me
083 843 67 64



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Email
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Web
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For other Chronic conditions



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Email
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