

# HIV/AIDS: Starting medicines

<http://familydoctor.org/handouts/164.html>

## How does HIV make people sick?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is passed by sexual contact and sharing drug needles. When HIV infects someone, it tricks the cells so the virus can grow. Then the virus infects and destroys more cells, especially white blood cells that fight infection. When too few of these white blood cells are left, the infected person gets the serious infections and life-threatening problems of AIDS.

## How do HIV medicines work?

Several drugs have been approved for treating HIV. Some of these medicines have just recently become available. The medicines can be grouped according to the way they work against HIV.

One group of medicines, the reverse transcriptase inhibitors, works by getting in the way of an enzyme the virus needs in order to grow. If this enzyme doesn't work, the virus grows more slowly. The other main group of HIV medicines, the protease inhibitors, works by stopping the final growth stage of the virus. A newer type of medicine, called a fusion inhibitor, is also available. This drug works by preventing HIV from entering your body's healthy cells.

## What are some of the medicines used to treat HIV?

The medicines most often used to treat HIV are sometimes called by different names. They may be called by the generic name, the brand name, or the common abbreviation (the nickname).

For example, the medicine commonly known by its abbreviation, AZT, is also called zidovudine (the generic name) or Retrovir (the brand name).

Here is a list of some medicines used to fight HIV:

<i>Generic name</i>	<i>Brand name</i>	<i>Nickname</i>
<b>Reverse transcriptase inhibitors</b>		
Zidovudine	Retrovir	AZT
Didanosine	Videx	ddI
Zalcitabine	Hivid	ddC
Stavudine	Zerit	d4T
Lamivudine	Epivir	3TC

Abacavir	Ziagen	ABC
Nevirapine	Viramune	
Delaviridine	Rescriptor	DLV
Efavirenz	Sustiva	EFV
Zidovudine and lamivudine combination	Combivir	

### **Protease inhibitors**

Saquinavir	Invirase, Fortovase
Ritonavir	Norvir
Indinavir	Crixivan
Nelfinavir	Viracept
Amprenavir	Agenerase
<b>Fusion Inhibitors</b>	Enfuvirtide
Fuzeon	

## **What is the best time to start taking these medicines?**

CD4 cells are special white blood cells that are killed by HIV. Almost all experts agree that medicines for HIV should be started before the person's CD4 cells fall under 200. Most doctors want their patients to start taking medicines earlier, when the CD4 cell count is between 200 and 500. You and your doctor should talk about which medicines to take and when to start taking them. (See the handout on [HIV and Plasma Viral Load Testing](#) for more information on your CD4 cell count and your plasma viral load.)

## **Which are the best drugs for me to use?**

Each person should talk to his or her doctor about the medicines for HIV. Most doctors treat their patients with more than one medicine.

Your doctor will test your blood to see when you should start taking medicine. The blood tests can also show how well your medicine is working. The tests will help your doctor decide if your treatment should change.

## **Where can I get more information about HIV treatments?**

Many cities have telephone hotlines for both patients and the general public. Look for the number in your telephone yellow pages, under AIDS information. Here are some other resources:

- The CDC National AIDS Hotline is a 24-hour telephone hotline for general questions, at 800-342-AIDS.
- Information about government-approved guidelines for HIV/AIDS treatment is available from the HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service, at 800-HIV-0440.
- Or you can call the Project Inform National HIV/AIDS Treatment Hotline, at 800-822-7422.

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