

**NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
UNDETECTABLE
EQUALS UNTRANSMITTABLE U=U MESSAGING TOOLKIT**
CONSISTENTLY AND CORRECTLY TAKING TREATMENT & FOSTERING
COMBINATION PREVENTION SERVICES



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA





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Acronyms

ART:	Antiretroviral Treatment
DoH:	Department of Health
PMTCT:	Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission
PEP:	Post-Exposure Prophylaxis
PrEP:	Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis
RPCS:	Repeat Prescription Collections Strategy
STIs:	Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
TasP:	Treatment as Prevention
U=U:	Undetectable equals Untransmittable
VTP:	Vertical Transmission Prevention
WHO:	World Health Organization

1. Background and Context of the Treatment Support Programme in South Africa

The South African Department of Health, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, and its development partners, offers the largest HIV and AIDS response in the world. Despite the initial delay in the provision of anti-retroviral treatment (ART), the country has, since 2004, provided treatment to over 5.7 million patients. The Department recognizes that treatment alone does not stop the spread of HIV; but that preventing the transmission of HIV remains the most effective and most powerful defense in the fight against the epidemic. The combination of both treatment and prevention strategies has enabled the country to turn the tide against the scourge of HIV and AIDS.

The Department of Health premises the U=U messaging in the context of the broader PREVENTION strategy, including messaging around the correct and consistent use of condoms, adherence to treatment, and utilizing treatment as prevention i.e., PrEP and PEP. Messaging U=U as a separate, siloed intervention, outside of the larger PREVENTION agenda has the potential of undoing many of the gains that were achieved over the last several decades with regard to the ongoing transmission of HIV.

One of the cornerstones of the ART program has been the prevention of vertical transmission of HIV, historically known as the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) of HIV now called Vertical Transmission Prevention (VTP) programme. South Africa has been implementing treatment as a prevention intervention pre since the 1990s, when research showed that pregnant women living with HIV who used zidovudine (an HIV medicine also called Retrovir or AZT) greatly reduced the risk of transmitting HIV to their babies. There have been various policy changes since 1990 including test and treat campaign where all HIV positive clients are put on lifelong ART as soon as they are diagnosed HIV positive.

It has been proven that women living with HIV can reduce vertical transmission during pregnancy, delivery, and safely breastfeed their babies if they consistently and correctly take treatment and maintaining viral suppression. Taking ART reduces the amount of viral load in the blood to an extremely low level, a process known as viral suppression. An undetectable viral load according to South Africa ART Policy is one of 50 or less copies per ml. Taking ART consistently every day, and maintaining an undetectable viral load is the most effective way to stay healthy and to prevent the vertical transmission of HIV.

2. HIV prevention strategies

The country has been implementing combination prevention interventions for many years. The interventions include the social, behavioral, biomedical, therapeutic and preventative use of antiretroviral therapy (ART), which has assumed a cornerstone role in the current strategy for HIV prevention.

Behavioural prevention strategies: These promote healthy behaviours.

- Counselling on risk reduction
- Comprehensive sex education
- Peer education programs
- Social marketing campaigns (e.g., to promote condom use)

Biomedical: Interventions with clinical and medical methods

- HIV testing
- Antiretroviral treatment for all (PrEP, PEP and ART)
- Correct and consistent condom use
- Voluntary male circumcision

HIV testing is the entry point to the prevention, treatment, and management of HIV. The above-mentioned Prevention interventions must be emphasized as primary prevention of HIV acquisition (PrEP and PEP and Condoms) and/or transmission (Condoms and ART)

U=U must be implemented in conjunction with the available HIV Prevention interventions at all times

Table below summarizes various preventative uses of ART that have been implemented.

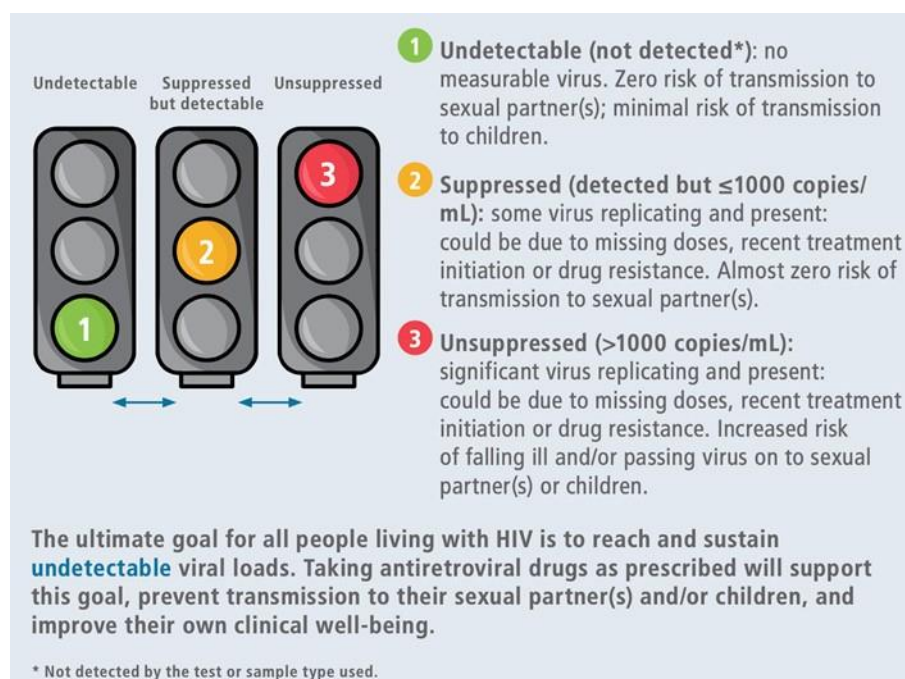
What	Acronym	Details
Post Exposure Prophylaxis	PEP PEP (occupational PEP) Sexual PEP (non-occupational PEP)	ART prophylaxis taken within 72 hours of potential exposure to HIV. The exposure can be occupational (e.g. needle prick) or non-occupational (e.g.. unprotected sex or injecting drugs).
Vertical Transmission Prevention	VTP	HIV testing and retesting of HIV negative pregnant and breastfeeding women, ART initiation for HIV positive pregnant and breast-feeding women and appropriate infant prophylaxis for HIV exposed infants
Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis	PrEP	Daily ART Prophylaxis in HIV-negative clients (men and women)

3. Principles

WHO Guidance based on systematic Review:

- Viral loads of less than 200 copies/mL not associated with sexual transmission of HIV
- Viral loads of less than 1000 copies/mL are not clearly associated with sexual transmission of HIV

WHO has defined 3 categories of viral load levels:



HIV viral load test results can be a motivation for adhering to treatment and achieving the goal of viral suppression. Emphasizing and strengthening adherence counselling during antiretroviral therapy initiation and throughout treatment are essential, including communicating about the prevention benefits of viral load suppression to all people living with HIV.

Current WHO-prequalified tests, including point-of-care and alternative sample types such as dried blood spot samples, can support the goals of treatment programmes to accurately measure and report viral load results as unsuppressed, suppressed, and undetectable.

South Africa Guidance

The Undetectable = Untransmittable campaign to empower People living with HIV, the affected, and the community.

A key element of empowerment is **RESPONSIBILITY**. Responsibility extends not only to the individual, but to protecting and preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS to partners, families, and the community at large.

- Encourage community members to take responsibility and ownership of their health.
- Openness and communication between partners
- Promotion of collaboration e.g. Family/peer support, disclosure, etc.
- Provision of service in a non-judgmental approach
- Commitment, honesty, and integrity
- Respect and dignity for PLHIV
- Client centered care services.

4. Purpose of the document

- To introduce the concept of Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U).
- To create a greater awareness and understanding of U=U.
- To promote HIV prevention and adherence to HIV treatment.
- To raise awareness on the effective use of ART to prevent transmission of HIV.
- To encourage and promote regular viral load monitoring.

5. Unpacking the U = U

Research has continued to examine the promise of Treatment as Prevention (TasP) as a real game-changer to affect the course of the HIV epidemic. Another prevention strategy, that has recently gained momentum has been Undetectable equals Untransmittable (U=U)". U=U means that if a person who is infected with HIV is on antiretroviral therapy, or ART, consistently and correctly adhering to treatment, and has a consistent undetectable HIV viral load (at less than or equal to 50 copies, the virus cannot be sexually transmitted to their sex partner.

There is currently no cure for HIV. However, taking ART consistently, every day, can reduce a person's viral load or the amount of HIV in their blood to undetectable levels. If the level of the virus reaches such a low level, as determined by laboratory testing processes (50 copies in SA), this affords them U=U status.

Studies of sex between HIV-positive and HIV-negative partners have found zero cases of transmission within heterosexual and homosexual sexual interactions, wherein the HIV-positive partner had an undetectable viral load. When someone receives an HIV diagnosis, it is important to get early and continuous treatment with ART to reach and maintain an undetectable viral load.

An undetectable viral load does not prevent the transmission or acquisition of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy. Condoms can prevent STI transmission and routine STI screening is therefore recommended. **The consistent use of condoms during every sexual encounter remains our number one defense against the spread of HIV & AIDS and STIs.**

In addition to U=U, other highly effective ways of preventing HIV transmission or acquisition include condoms and oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

6. Benefits of U=U

Maintaining an undetectable viral load leads to the best possible health outcomes for a person living with HIV. In addition to improving the health and well-being of a person living with HIV, achieving an undetectable viral load means that a person living with HIV might not transmit HIV to their partner(s) sexually. Achieving and maintaining an undetectable viral load serves as a very effective prevention method to help interrupt existing transmission chains. This means an undetectable viral load not only contributes towards HIV-positive persons staying healthy and live a long healthy life but also effectively prevents HIV sexual transmission.

7. Applying U = U in the country as an integral part of the Treatment Literacy Programme

WHAT IS?

VIRAL LOAD: Amount of HIV in the blood

UNTRANSMITTABLE: When an undetectable viral load prevents the sexual transmission of HIV.

UNDETECTABLE: Viral load less than 50 copies/ml and cannot be detected by standard tests. The main benefit of adherence to treatment is achieving a point of being UNDETECTABLE.

8. How can one reach the status of undetectable and Untransmittable?

- At least two (2) consecutive viral load results of less than 50 c/ml over a six-month (6) period.
- Continuing to be on Antiretroviral therapy even after the viral load is undetectable,
- Monitoring of VL annually while on treatment (within cohort),
 - By seeing a health care provider regularly and taking antiretroviral therapy (ART) as prescribed, nearly everyone with HIV can become and remain undetectable.

N.B. It is important to note that U=U is not a cure. While the virus may not be transmitted to sex partners, it is still present in the body.

9. When U=U Should not be recommended?

- Currently, there is no sufficient evidence to suggest that suppressed HIV viral load will prevent HIV from being transmitted when sharing needles by people who inject drugs
- Cases of HIV transmission from breastfeeding have been reported even when the mother's viral load was undetectable in both blood and breast milk.

Message: 1

- I am **UNDETECTABLE** if my Viral load is ≤ 50 copies/ml and cannot be detected by standard laboratory tests.
- **UNDETECTABLE** viral load is certain if I comply and adhere to my ARVs.
- I am **UNTRANSMITTABLE** when an undetectable viral load prevents the sexual transmission of HIV.
- I am **UNTRANSMITTABLE** if I use ARVs treatment as prevention.
- I am **UNTRANSMITTABLE** and I continue to use condoms correctly and consistently.

Message: 2

To stay undetectable and Untransmittable, just remember TLC:

- **T (Treatment):** Take your HIV treatment daily as prescribed.
- **L (Laboratory):** Monitor your viral load through regular blood tests at the facility.
- **C (Connect):** Keep regular clinical appointments/Repeat Prescription collections (RPCs)

Message :3

- Keeping your HIV undetectable helps you live a long and healthy life.
- You need to get your HIV to an undetectable level and to keep it undetectable, take antiretroviral medicines as prescribed.
- It may take up to 6 months of taking HIV treatment medicines to bring your HIV down to an undetectable level.
- If your viral load is undetectable and you are taking your medications as prescribed, you can be sure you will not pass HIV through sex.
- If you stop taking HIV medicines, your HIV can rebound to a detectable level within 1 to 2 weeks, and you may pass HIV to your sex partners.
- Keeping your HIV at an undetectable level helps you safely conceive a child with your partner.
- Remember to use condoms consistently and correctly.

Message: 4

- I protect those that I love by adhering to ARV Treatment, being undetectable and Untransmittable.
- I take responsibility for my health by using condoms to prevent transmission of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections.
- I take responsibility for my health by using condoms correctly and consistently to prevent unplanned pregnancies.
- Taking ARVs is a lifelong commitment.
- I encourage my family and community to test for HIV and if HIV positive to be enrolled for ARV treatment.

10. Role of the Health Care Workers

Health Care Workers are pivotal to the U = U campaign by:

- a. Encouraging community members to test for HIV.
- b. Encouraging People living with HIV to adhere to ARV treatment.
- c. Regularly monitoring Viral Load to PLWHIV on treatment
- d. Encouraging People living with HIV to live a healthy lifestyle.
- e. Creating an enabling environment for provision of friendly health care services.

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National Department of Health

**Dr AB Xuma Building,
1112 Voortrekker Rd,
Pretoria Townlands 351-JR,
PRETORIA, 0187**

Switchboard: 012 395 8000