"Churches, Channels of Hope"

Basic ARV fact sheet

1. What is antiretroviral treatment?
Antiretroviral treatment is a combination of medicines that specifically fight the HIV in the body of someone who is infected with HIV.

2. What is the difference between ARVs, ART and antiretroviral medicine?
ARVs is the abbreviation or shortened version for antiretroviral medication. ART is the abbreviation for antiretroviral treatment. Both refer to the same thing; medication that fights HIV.

3. Can ARVs cure HIV?
No, there is no cure for HIV. ARVs are a form of treatment or medication that helps the body of someone with HIV to cope better with the effects of the virus and therefore to live a longer healthier life, but it cannot remove HIV from the body once someone is infected.

4. Should all HIV positive people be taking ARVs?
No, in the early stages of HIV infection a person is actually still quite healthy. During the asymptomatic stage people show no symptoms, because their immune systems are still strong enough to protect them from infections. Therefore, it is only when an HIV positive person starts to fall sick more regularly and with more serious opportunistic infections that his or her body will need the assistance of ARVs. ARVs also have a role in the prevention of transmission of HIV. Someone who is accidently exposed to HIV (eg. through rape or injury) may use ARVs for a time (this is called post exposure prophylaxis). ARVs also play a role in preventing mother to child transmission (PMTCT). Although research is promising that treatment may also play a role in prevention in general, ARVs are not yet prescribed for general HIV prevention.

5. Do ARVs really work?
ARVs really work for the majority of people, but it may take the body a few weeks to adjust to the new medication. Therefore it may initially seem as if it isn’t working or is simply making one sicker.

Before a person starts ARV treatment, he or she should be specifically prepared for it. One of the important things a health care professional (or doctor) will discuss with him or her would be the possibility of side-effects. HIV positive people who are on ARVs and who experience side-effects should not stop the medication, but should inform his or her health care professional immediately.

In a small percentage of people ARVs treatment is not successful. Also, if a person is already in an advanced stage of AIDS, his or her body may not be strong enough to cope with the effects of ARV medication.

6. Is ARV medication dangerous?
ARVs are strong medicines and do have side-effects. In very rare cases the side-effects of ARVs could be dangerous and therefore it is important to report all side-effects to your health care professional immediately.

It is also very important to follow the prescriptions your health care professional provided for the ARV medication.

7. What does ‘side-effects’ mean?
All medicines are chemicals that affect our bodies in different ways. Some of these effects are good and do the work we take the medicines for. However, there might be other effects ‘on the side’ of the good effect, that sometimes make one feel sick. These unwanted effects are called side-effects.

Since one’s body is still adapting to the medicine, the side-effects or symptoms experienced with ARVs are usually worse during the first few weeks.
Many side-effects can be treated if diagnosed early.

8. What are the side-effects of ARVs?

Common side effects include: Nausea and vomiting, Pain in the legs, Headaches, Severe skin rashes, Not sleeping well, Stomach ache, Bad dreams, Tiredness, Diarrhoea,

These side-effects usually go away after a few weeks, but remember some side effects may be dangerous. Therefore it is very important that you should inform your health care professional immediately. However, do not stop the treatment without speaking to the health care professional or doctor first.

9. Are ARVs better than good nutrition?

When we consider medicine or nutrition, it is never one or the other. A person who is still in the asymptomatic stage will be healthy and good nutrition will help him or her to stay healthy for longer and delay the development of AIDS and the need for ARVs.

When someone does reach a time where his or her body needs ARVs, he or she will still need proper nutrition to complement the ARVs.

10. When should an HIV positive person start taking ARVs?

If you know that you are HIV positive, it is in your best interest to go for regular check-ups. These check-ups will also include CD4-count tests that determine the strength of one’s immune system.

The WHO and many country guidelines suggest that treatment should be started if the CD4 count is less than 350 CD4-cells/mm³. In many countries treatment is still started when a person has less than 200 CD4-cells/mm³ and/or he or she suffers from serious opportunistic infections.

11. How long should a person stay on ARVs?

Once one starts with ARV treatment it is a life-long commitment and it is very important that one should NOT STOP the medication once one feels better or healthier. The moment you stop the medication the virus will simply multiply and attack your immune system again.

12. What is ARV resistance?

It means that the combination of ARV medicine a person was using is no longer effective and the immune system is becoming weaker again.

13. If a person is on ARVs can he or she still infect someone else?

Although the viral load (number of viruses in the person’s blood) will be very low or even undetectable when treatment is successful, it might still be possible to transmit the virus and therefore it is still important to take the necessary precautions.

Information is based on:
HIV and AIDS and Treatment; Khomanani
HIV and AIDS Prevention, Care and Treatment; Khomanani
WHO