

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does “undetectable” mean?

Undetectable is the term used when a person’s viral load (how much virus there is in the blood) is so low that the machines we use in the laboratory to measure it cannot detect the virus.

In the UK we often express undetectable as having a viral load of less than 50 copies, or <50 copies per ml. However, for these studies a higher threshold of <200 copies per ml was used.

2. Is “undetectable” the same as “cured”?

No. Even though a person’s viral load is so low that it cannot be detected by the laboratory machines, this does not mean that they’re cured. If the person stopped taking their medication the virus would start replicating again.

3. Does U=U apply for everything, or just sex?

At this time, the data we have only applies to the sexual transmission of HIV. We don’t have enough data for things like injecting drug use to make such a statement at this time. The current British HIV Association guidelines do not recommend positive mothers breastfeed – even if they have an undetectable viral load.

4. Did anyone become positive during the studies you mentioned?

Unfortunately, yes. In each study a small number of participants were diagnosed with HIV. But due to contact tracing and virus analysis the researchers were able to trace back the source of infection to someone outside the relationship. There were **ZERO** infections from an HIV positive, undetectable, partner in any of the studies.

5. Does U=U protect against other infections?

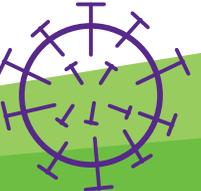
No. U=U will only prevent onwards transmission of HIV. U=U will not protect you against other sexually transmitted infections, blood-borne viruses or pregnancy. The best method for preventing these is to wear a condom or femidom.

6. What about viral load blips?

Sometimes the viral load can blip to just above 50 and then go down again, without a person missing any pills. In the Partner studies, blips were allowed up to the level of 200 copies/ml and they didn’t change the results. If your virus levels go above 200, discuss this with your doctor.

7. Where can I learn more?

You can find out more at savinglivesuk.com and preventionaccess.org



It's a fact

U=U

Undetectable = Untransmittable

“CAN’T PASS IT ON”

It’s a fact: a person living with HIV, who has an undetectable viral load, will not pass HIV on to their sexual partners.

It’s over thirty years since the start of the HIV epidemic, but now new science and medical data is changing the way we look at HIV and improving the lives of people living with, or affected by, HIV.



Back in 2008 a Swiss HIV researcher, named Pietro Vernazza, released the following statement:

“An HIV-infected person on antiretroviral therapy with completely suppressed viraemia (“effective ART”) is not sexually infectious, i.e. cannot transmit HIV through sexual contact.”

The world was not ready for Vernazza’s vision. He drew criticism from much of the medical and scientific community. Eight years later Vernazza would be vindicated.

HPTN 052

This study started in 2005 and has followed over 1600 heterosexual couples who were having condomless sex. After 10 years there have been **NO** HIV transmissions when the HIV-infected partner’s virus was stably suppressed by antiretroviral therapy.

The PARTNER Study

In 2016 the results from the PARTNER study was presented. PARTNER followed 888 sero-different couples, where one partner was HIV positive with an undetectable viral load, and the other partner was HIV negative.

After six years and over 58,000 acts of condomless sex the study reported **ZERO** linked partner to partner infections.

Opposites Attract Study

In 2017 we saw data from the Opposites Attract Study which followed 343 gay couples, where again one partner was HIV positive with an undetectable viral load, and the other partner was HIV negative.

After four years and over 16,800 acts of condomless sex the study reported **ZERO** linked partner to partner infections.

The PARTNER 2 Study

In 2018 the PARTNER 2 study reported its findings. This study focused on men who have sex with men. After eight years the study was unable to find a single linked HIV transmission when viral load was undetectable, even after 783 gay couples had sex without condoms 77,000 times.

The Prevention Access Campaign (PAC) have been working with both medical and political allies to campaign for improved understanding of HIV and the benefits of early and effective treatment.

The **Saving Lives Charity** is proud to support PAC’s work and the community consensus statement on **Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U):**

ZERO INFECTIONS

“People living with HIV on ART with an undetectable viral load in their blood have a negligible risk of sexual transmission of HIV. Depending on the drugs employed it may take as long as six months for the viral load to become undetectable. Continued and reliable HIV suppression requires selection of appropriate agents and excellent adherence to treatment. HIV viral suppression should be monitored to assure both personal health and public health benefits.”

NOTE: An undetectable HIV viral load only prevents HIV transmission to sexual partners. Condoms can also prevent HIV transmission as well as other STIs and pregnancy. The choice of HIV prevention method may be different depending upon a person’s sexual practices, circumstances and relationships. For instance, if someone is having sex with multiple partners or in a non-monogamous relationship, they might consider using condoms to prevent other STIs.

“**NEGLIGIBLE**” = so small or unimportant as to be not worth considering; insignificant.



Dr Steve Taylor,
Medical Director of Saving Lives said:

To be able to confidently say to someone: You CANNOT pass HIV to your sexual partners if you’re on successful treatment is so incredibly powerful. It can transform the way a person living with HIV views and thinks about themselves and how they relate to others.

*We need everyone living with HIV to know that **U equals U**. In fact, to really fight HIV related stigma we need everybody to know it!*

