

Undetectable = Untransmittable and STDs: Common Questions

FACT: A person living with HIV who is on treatment and has an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV through sex. In other words, Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U).

“U=U is the foundation for being able to end the epidemic.” Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Director, NIAID
“It’s very clear the risk is zero. The time for excuses is over.” Dr. Alison Rodger, Lead Author, PARTNER studies
“U=U set me free.” Maria Mejia, International AIDS Activist

Why is it important to think about U=U and STD prevention together?

To meet the full promise of U=U, the intertwined HIV and STD epidemics must be addressed. STDs are one of the underlying causes of new HIV transmissions. Having an untreated STD such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis places someone at greater risk of contracting HIV if they are exposed. While progress has been made in reducing new HIV diagnoses, thanks to sustained advocacy, investments, and groundbreaking advancements such as U=U and PrEP, the same progress has not been mirrored in the STD field, where new cases have ballooned to all-time highs for the fifth year in a row.

The same forces that drive HIV also drive other STDs, fueled by health disparities and stigma. U=U provides an unprecedented opportunity to fight stigma and to engage and sustain people in HIV and STD care. This engagement must include continued promotion of condoms as a proven STD prevention tool as well as a frank acknowledgment that condoms are not for everyone. We must also recognize that biomedical advancements such as U=U and PrEP will remain inaccessible to some due to structural and financial barriers as well as personal choice. The full suite of prevention strategies—including condom use, promotion of risk reduction and safer sex practices, STD screening and treatment, comprehensive sex education, and access to biomedical prevention tools—remain essential in the fight against both STDs and HIV.

How can I incorporate U=U messaging and STD prevention?

Similar to how HIV testing and screening for STDs is a routine (every 3 months) component of being on PrEP, people living with HIV need to regularly see their providers for lab work and viral load testing. When a person is undetectable, and therefore untransmittable for HIV, they are typically engaged in their health care. Offering STD screening alongside viral load testing is an easy and important way to be proactive about sexual health and reach patients who already have to be at the doctor’s office for their routine lab work. This also highlights the need for providers to discuss, with cultural humility and empathy, their patients’ sexual practices on a routine basis to help them make informed choices about HIV and STD prevention methods that best fit their own situation.

Does having an STD impact transmission of HIV in the context of U=U?

According to NAM aidsmap¹ and i-Base², a person living with HIV who has an undetectable viral load and has an STD still cannot transmit HIV. The presence of STDs do not impact transmission of HIV by someone who is undetectable but they can increase the risk of transmission when someone living with HIV has a detectable viral load.

How do I message this to my patients if I am worried about STDs and condomless sex?

Being clear and consistent in messaging about U=U and STDs is critical. It is important to tell patients:

- U=U only applies to HIV. And for U to equal U, treatment adherence is required.
- Because U=U only applies to HIV, condoms are important protection tools to prevent STDs and unwanted pregnancy.

- It is important to discuss your options for protection with your partner(s), whether they be U=U, PrEP, condoms, or a combination of all three. We are all responsible for our sexual health!

Is the risk really zero for U=U?

In practical terms, yes, the risk is zero. Dr. Fauci, Director of NIAID at NIH, has said that the chance of transmitting the virus through sex when undetectable is “impossible.”³ It is important to note that U=U does not apply to breast feeding or needle sharing, although treatment still *reduces* the risk of transmission for those as well.⁴

When describing the “risk” from one human being to another in the most intimate moments of their lives, it’s important to be impeccable with words and attitudes. When speaking with people living with HIV, their sexual partners, and the wider community, it is important to describe U=U in a way that inspires confidence and does not promote unnecessary doubts or fear. Phrases like “cannot pass it on” or “can’t transmit” or “impossible” are clear and easily understandable.

What viral load level is “undetectable”?

Viral load tests vary in sensitivity based on testing technologies. For the purposes of U=U, “undetectable” is synonymous with <200 copies of HIV per mL of blood.

What are some phrases to avoid?

If someone has an undetectable viral load, stays on medication as prescribed and stays in care, they can feel confident in U=U as an HIV prevention method. Overly cautious attitudes undermine the message and can have a profound negative impact. We call these the “big erasers”:

- “I believe U=U, but use a condom and/or PrEP just in case” conveys doubt about U=U.

A condom is not necessary to prevent HIV transmission from someone with an undetectable viral load. Condoms are helpful to prevent other STDs or unintended pregnancy or if adherence is a challenge for the partner living with HIV. Similarly, PrEP is not necessary to prevent HIV transmission from someone with an undetectable viral load. Some people may choose to use PrEP if multiple sexual partners are involved or if adherence is a challenge for the partner living with HIV. Other prevention methods like condoms and PrEP can provide an extra sense of security and shared responsibility.

- “You’re only as good as your last viral load” is a scary and unnecessarily anxiety provoking concept.

This means a person with HIV could be “infectious” at any moment even if they’re adherent and their recent viral load was undetectable. That doesn’t happen⁵. It’s important to convey that once undetectable status is achieved⁶ and a person with HIV stays on treatment, gets labs done regularly and stays in care, that person and sexual partners can feel confident about having sex without any risk of HIV transmission.

A full **U=U communications guide** and many additional resources are available at www.uequalsu.org
Use #UequalsU in social media for greater visibility and to connect to the U=U movement.

Contact: Cameron Kinker cameron@preventionaccess.org for resources and support.

¹ <http://www.aidsmap.com/news/sep-2018/study-confirms-stis-make-no-difference-undetectability-and-infectiousness-people>

² <http://i-base.info/u-equals-u-qa/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCwrazWpT4&t=>

⁴ <https://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/undetectable-equals-untransmittable-building-hope-and-ending-hiv-stigma>

⁵ <http://i-base.info/u-equals-u-qa/>

⁶ Because maintaining an undetectable viral load is foundational to the U=U strategy and may be functionally challenging for many individuals with HIV, it is recommended that consistent adherence to ART is demonstrated before relying on U=U as a sole, effective HIV prevention strategy. Consistent adherence may be confirmed with: Two consecutive undetectable viral load test results separated by at least several weeks; or more conservatively, a full 6-month period during which all viral load test results are durably undetectable.