

What are side-effects?

Drugs are designed to fight specific illness, but they can also cause unwanted effects in our body (so-called "side-effects" or, when they are negative, "adverse events"). Anti-HIV drugs are not an exception.

Some of these side-effects are merely uncomfortable, but some others may be potentially serious or even fatal. Some side-effects are transitory, while others can last for the whole course of treatment or even beyond that. Some appear when you start HIV therapy or a new combination, but some may not appear until months or years later. Lastly, some adverse events are relatively frequent while others only appear in a small percentage of people taking that medication.

Before they are made generally available to patients, all drugs have to pass several clinical trials to ensure they are effective and safe to use. This research allows possible adverse events that might appear to be detected. Even once a drug is approved, health authorities keep collecting data in order to update, if necessary, the list of possible side-effects.

Although many people taking antiretroviral drugs will suffer some of the side-effects listed in the drug's patient information at one time or another, generally the risk of developing an adverse event is low. In some instances, the longer you take a particular drug, the more chance you have of experiencing some of the adverse events associated with it.

It is wise to know about any possible side-effects of the medication you are taking, but remember that it doesn't mean necessarily that you will experience them all (in fact, it is extremely unlikely you will) and you may not experience any of them. You should take into account the fact that every person reacts differently to each drug, and that reactions can depend on a range of factors.

Side-effects when starting a treatment

It is understandable to be concerned about possible side-effects before starting antiretroviral therapy. Nevertheless, although relatively frequent, most side-effects associated with beginning anti-HIV treatment are mild and disappear within the few weeks. The most

common side-effects are sickness, nausea, diarrhoea, headaches, lack of appetite and tiredness.

You may find useful to know the most common side-effects for each drug before choosing a particular anti-retroviral combination. For instance, if you have prior risk factors for liver, kidney or heart disease or you have a history of psychiatric or neurological disorders, then you should avoid using those drugs that could worsen these conditions; there will be others that suit you better.

What can you do if side-effects continue?

Sometimes doctors think that patients' reporting of their side-effects is exaggerated. In fact, most people play down their importance and do not always talk about them openly to their doctor.

Because of side-effects (or the fear of suffering them in the future), some people find they cannot maintain good adherence to their treatment. This can lead to the development of drug resistance. Because of this, it is important that you do not stop taking your medication without discussing it with your doctor, and that you talk to your doctor about any concerns you have on this issue.

If you are experiencing side-effects because of your medication, there are some measures you and your doctor can take after identifying which drug is causing them:

- Measuring the amount of drug(s) in blood (pharmacokinetic analysis). If your drug level is higher than needed, doses can be adjusted.
- Changing to another antiretroviral combination.
- Taking specific drugs to counteract these side-effects.
- Following health advice or adopting new habits to minimise the impact of side-effects.