

Our+Care OC



DID YOU KNOW...

1 in 5

People living with HIV in Orange County **do not know they have HIV**.*

2 in 5

People living with HIV in Orange County **have not seen a doctor in the last year**. **

3 in 5

People living with HIV in Orange County **do not have viral loads less than 200 copies per milliliter of blood**. ***

* CDC Estimated Back Calculation Methodology (0.21/0.79 x 6,674 diagnosed persons living with HIV)

** OC Unmet Need Estimate as of July 2010

*** OC HIV Case Registry as of December 2011

Since the first cases of HIV were found in the US, there have been many big changes that have made the lives for people living with HIV (PLWH) better. One of the biggest changes has been the improvements to HIV medicine. There have also been many studies that show how important it is for PLWH to be linked to medical care. Being linked to care as early as possible and staying in care helps PLWH to have healthy lives.

PLWH, service providers, and other concerned people have worked hard to match HIV goals in Orange County to the goals in the National HIV/AIDS Strategy. These goals were set to:

- Make it easier for PLWH to get medical care
- Make PLWH healthier
- Lower the number of new people who get HIV

One of the most important things to do to help people with HIV live healthier is to keep them involved in their care. When a person is in care, he or she is more likely to:

- Take their medications
- Have less HIV virus in their bodies
- Have less HIV-related infections
- Lower the spread of HIV¹

As a person living with HIV, **you play the most important role when it comes to your health**. Work with your doctor. Learn basic information about HIV and what it does to your body. Taking these steps will make it easier to get healthy and stay healthy.

What are you waiting for?

Most people don't really like going to the doctor. Most people don't go unless they feel sick. Studies show that the same is true for PLWH.² The difference is that **waiting to get medical care until you feel sick can be harmful**. This is because:

- Even if a person with HIV feels well, the virus can be weakening his or her immune system
- PLWH can get certain illnesses easier than others

It is easier to protect your immune system than to fix it once it has been damaged. Regular visits with your doctor can even help keep you from getting certain infections. For example, have you ever wondered why your doctor always wants to draw your blood? Blood is being drawn for a reason. Some common reasons are:

- To see if you are at risk for getting an infection so that it can be prevented
- To check your CD4 count / viral load
- To see how well your medications are working

By listening to your body and **talking** with your doctor, it can be easier to find out if something is wrong early. If something is found early, it usually can be taken care of before it gets worse.

Orange County Goals

1. Help people who **just found out** they have HIV to get **medical care** within three months of when they found out.
2. Keep persons living with HIV **in care**
3. Increase the number of persons living with HIV who have **suppressed viral loads** (less than 200 copies of the virus in a small amount (one milliliter) of blood)

HIV Treatment Guidelines

The good news is that **you can control your HIV**. Medical experts have come up with instructions for doctors to use to help decide what treatment choices might work best for **you**. These instructions are called the Public Health Services Guidelines. These guidelines give information on how much you should usually see your HIV doctor. Seeing your doctor on a regular basis helps both you and your doctor know how healthy you are. The guidelines can be found at: <http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov/>.

Viral Load & CD4 Count

Controlling HIV is different for each person. People with HIV need **ongoing** medical care in order to get or stay healthy. Viral load and CD4 count are two of the main things your doctor looks at to see how HIV is acting in your body.

- When your doctor talks about **viral load**, he or she is talking about the amount of HIV virus that is in a small sample of your blood. If you are taking HIV medicine, the viral load also shows how well the medicine is working. This is because the goal of HIV medicine is to keep the virus from making copies of itself. When the virus cannot make copies of itself, the amount of virus in your body gets lower.

5 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO STAY HEALTHY

1. **Stay involved** in your care by going to all of your medical appointments.
2. Missed an appointment? **Call and reschedule** as soon as possible.
3. Taking HIV medications? **Do not miss a dose**.
4. Don't **know your CD4 and viral load**? Ask your doctor.
5. Don't be afraid to **ask questions!** For more information go to: <http://ochealthinfo.com/phs/about/dcepi/hiv/libehiv>

- The **immune system** is the system in your body that helps it fight infections. **CD4 cells** (also called T-cells) are an important part of the immune system. They lead the attack when your body is infected with things that can make you sick. The HIV virus attacks your CD4 cells. When a person has a low number of CD4 cells, it is easier for him or her to get sick. A low number of CD4 cells also make it harder to fight infections.

Guidelines recommend that for most people with HIV, CD4 count and viral load should be checked every 3 to 4 months. Remember that this is a general guideline. You should work with your doctor to figure out how often your CD4 and viral load should be checked. For example, a person who has the same CD4 count for a long time might not need to be seen as much. If someone is sick, he or she may need to be seen more.

Starting HIV Medicine

The Public Health Services guidelines suggest that everyone living with HIV should take HIV medicine at some point. It is important to remember that each person is different. Some doctors may choose not to start a person on medicine based the person's CD4 count or another condition the person may have. If you are already taking HIV medicine, it is very important that you take them exactly how the doctor tells you. **This means trying your best not to miss a dose.** This is because HIV medicines works best when they are taken every day at the right times. Starting and stopping your medications can actually keep them from working right. If you are not taking HIV medicine, **talk to your doctor about your choices. Tell your doctor about things that may make it hard for you take your medicine. Once you are taking HIV medicine, let your doctor know if you are having any side effects.**

If you find it hard to make it to your appointments, there are people that can help. You can find a list of agencies that can help you at <http://ochealthinfo.com/phs/about/dcepi/hiv/libehiv/services>

¹Marks G, Crepaz M, Janssen RS. Estimating sexual transmission of HIV from persons aware and unaware they are infected with the virus in the USA. *AIDS* (2006): 10; 1447-50

²Gordano TP, Gifford AL, White AC Jr, et al. Retention in care: a challenge to survival with HIV infection. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2007;44:1493-9.

ORANGE COUNTY HIV QUALITY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



Our+Care OC is a project of the Orange County HIV Quality Management Committee. The HIV Quality Management Committee works to increase the quality of Ryan White services. For more information about the committee, please call (714) 834-8711.

If you have feedback or topic suggestions for future newsletters, please contact Melissa Corral at

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