



LIVING WITH

HIV/AIDS

Frequently Asked Questions By people living with HIV/AIDS, Friends & Family.



MEZAM POLYCLINIC HIV-AIDS TREATMENT CENTRE, 2006

COMPILED: BY MEZAM POLYCLINIC HIV-AIDSTREATMENT CENTER IN 2004.



**PRODUCED BY:**

**COPAAP(COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AGAINST AIDS PROGRAM).**

**FOR FUTHER COPIES OR INFORMATION,**

**Please contact: COPAAP, P.O. BOX 450, BAMENDA,  
REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON.**

**TEL: 237 336 34 31, 237 777 28 27. Fax: 336 34 31**

## PREFACE

Commonly asked questions by people living with HIV-AIDS, friends and families was compiled by Counsellors at the Mezam Polyclinic HIV-AIDS treatment centre, and printed thanks to financial assistance from Christian Church groups in the Netherlands.

We have gone for those questions whose answers should enable people with HIV-AIDS, live a healthy and positive life, and help the public overcome its stigmatisation of HIV-AIDS. Many relevant questions for which there are yet no easy answers have been left out. What do we do for instance in the case of a patient on anti-retroviral treatment who procrastinates on the decision to inform a possibly sero-negative spouse of his/her status, despite repeated counselling?

Punitive legislation as a deterrent for willful exposure of someone else to the HIV may appear attractive as a measure to combat the HIV-AIDS pandemic. While such legislation would be justified, it would be difficult to police, increase the stigma on HIV-AIDS, and drive the problem underground.

Commonly asked questions by people living with HIV-AIDS... is a discussion between these groups and Counsellors. Let us hope that this small booklet, through its wide distribution and readership, stimulates open and free debate between HIV-AIDS persons, their friends, their families, and the society at large. Such interchange should result in understanding, compassion, and love for each other, and since love of neighbour like of self will know no stigma and no unsafe sex, we would have dealt a death blow to the HIV-AIDS pandemic.

**DR. ACHU NGANG PAUL**

## INTRODUCTION



*Vera Smith, VSO Volunteer at the Mezam Polyclinic, 2003-2004*

YOU OR YOUR BROTHER, SISTER, HUSBAND, WIFE, FATHER, MOTHER OR FRIEND DID THE TEST FOR HIV BECAUSE:

- You just wanted to know your status.
- You are getting into a new relationship.
- You want to get married.
- You want to have sex without a condom
- You have not been feeling well lately or you are sick more often than you used to be. Whatever the reason, if the result is positive it is something you do not expect. When the result is positive there are a lot of things to think about and you may have a lot of questions. Maybe you did not ask the doctor or counselor everything you wanted to when you got the result.

This brochure has been made so you can read some of the **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)** in **Mezam Polyclinic** and the answers to those questions.

## CONTENTS

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Contents	5
1) When will there be a cure for HIV?	6
2) Is there treatment for HIV?	6
3) What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?	6
4) What illnesses can you get with HIV or AIDS?	6
5) What can I do to stay healthy?	7
6) Can I drink alcohol?	8
7) What food should I eat?	8
8) What is a CD-4 count?	8
9) When do I start treatment?	9
10) What are the side-effects?	9
11) For how long do I take treatment?	10
12) Which drugs are available in Cameroon?	10
13) Where can I get the treatment?	11
14) Is it safe to give or sell my medicines to others?	11
15) Can I combine traditional medicine and ART?	11
16) Should my partner go on treatment?	12
17) Can I have children?	12
18) How can I make sure not to infect others?	12
19) Should I talk with others about my HIV-status?	13
20) Where can I meet other people living with HIV?	13
More information	14

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### 1. WHEN WILL THERE BE A CURE FOR HIV?

At the moment there is not yet a cure for HIV that can take the virus completely out of the body but there are a lot of other things you can do to live healthily with HIV (see also question 5).

A lot of research is being done to find a vaccine to prevent HIV or a medicine to cure HIV. Until they have found a cure and/or a vaccine we have to try and live as healthily as possible with HIV.

❖ Until they have found a cure and/or a vaccine for HIV we have to try and live as healthily as possible with HIV.

### 2. Is there treatment for HIV?

Yes, there has been treatment for HIV since 1996. It is being used in different places in the world and also in Cameroon. This medicine is called ART (Anti-retro Viral Therapy). Its aim is to reduce the level of HIV in the body to as low as possible for as long as possible. The less HIV virus there is in the body the healthier you will be.

❖ The less HIV virus is in the body the healthier you will be.

### 3. What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?

One can have HIV for a long time before getting sick. This means if you are HIV positive you don't have to be sick and it means a lot of people can keep on doing the things they did before, like working and going to school.

When the HIV has killed most of the CD-4 cells (see under question 8), life threatening cancers and infections will occur. That's when we say somebody has AIDS. Often people only know that somebody is HIV positive when he or she has become sick (is having AIDS). But it may take 3 to 7 years, or even more with some people, before somebody with HIV gets AIDS.

There are different reasons why some people get sick faster than others. It depends on the type of HIV, the amount of virus, the body's response to the virus and your general health.

❖ If you are HIV positive you don't have to be sick and it means a lot of people can keep on doing the things they did before, like working and going to school.

### 4. What illnesses can you get with HIV or AIDS?

If your immune system is not functioning well your body will get infections you would normally be protected against. These infections take the opportunity given by the weak immune system and are therefore called "opportunistic infections".

Common infections are:

- TB (tuberculosis),
  - Candida (fungus in the mouth, throat or vagina),
  - diarrhoea (caused by different germs),
  - pneumonia,
  - herpes zoster (god fire),
  - cryptococcal meningitis, and toxoplasmosis.
- ❖ For several of these illnesses there are medicines that can treat the illness. And if your immunity is low the doctor may advise you to take medicine to prevent these opportunistic infections from happening.

## 5. What can I do to stay healthy?

In order to stay healthy there are a lot of different things you can do.

When you have any illness or complaint don't wait until you get too sick before consulting a doctor .An illness and HIV can make the HIV worse. So ask your doctor if it would be good for you to start taking ART.

Beside this, it is important to have a healthy lifestyle. This means:

**NO ALCHOHOL! NO CIGARETTES!**



- (1) Take a healthy diet
- (2) Avoid smoking.
- (3) Don't drink too much alcohol.
- (4) Keep fit and well exercised.
- (5) Avoid taking unnecessary medicine.
- (6) Take plenty of rest and sleep.
- (7) Think about life in a positive way.
- (8) Seek treatment early for sickness
- (9) Make sure there is someone you can talk to.

**6. Can I drink alcohol?**

Too much alcohol too often is always harmful, especially when you are taking ART. One bottle of beer is not a problem, but drinking too much also stimulates people to have unsafe sex which is not good. For some people it is better not to take any alcohol at all e.g. if you have liver-problems.

**7. What food should I eat?**

**FRUITS and VEGETABLES!!**



Try to eat as healthily as possible. A varied diet of fresh foods with lots of fruits and vegetables is best. To prevent diarrhoea you should not eat raw or undercooked meat. Peel fruits or wash them before eating and boil water before drinking.

If you lost weight due to the HIV infection or diarrhoea you should eat a high calorie and protein diet. This means that you eat small meals to give you energy and make you stronger, 3 or 4 times a day. For example, calorie rich foods: Fufu corn, potatoes, rice;. protein rich foods: eggs, groundnuts, beans, meat, fish.

Besides food, it is important that you drink a least one and a half or two litres a day. For example: water, tea, fruit juice. If you have diarrhea take ORS (Oral Rehydration Solution) as instructions on the packet, or make your own. [your nurse or doctor will tell you how].

❖ Try to eat as healthily as possible. A balanced diet of fresh foods with lots of fruits and vegetables is best.

**8. What is a CD-4 count?**

**Diagnosis and Management of HIV/AIDS**

**The CD4 Machine**



**MPC STAFF ANALYSING CD4 COUNT SPECIMEN.**

The CD-4 is one of the white blood cells in your blood. It protects you from becoming sick. The HIV multiplies in these cells and destroys them. So when there is a lot of virus inside your body the CD-4 cells will be low [CD4 count] and your body will not have good protection against illnesses.

For a CD-4 count you will have to give some blood. This count is always necessary for the doctor to know if it would be good for you to start taking ART.

The CD-4 count is normally between 600 and 2000 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>. A CD-4 count is a good indicator of how the medicine you are taking is working. If the CD-4 count goes up this means the medicines are doing their job, and your body has good protection from illnesses. If the CD-4 count is low the risk of becoming sick is higher.

❖ If the CD-4 count goes up it means your body can protect itself better against illnesses, if it is low the risk of becoming sick is higher.

## 9. When do I start treatment?

You always have to consult a doctor in order to know if it is the right moment to start taking treatment. Whether to start treatment differs for each person. It is not good to start too early, because the medicines are strong and it is also not good to start too late. It depends on your CD-4 count and your health. If your CD-4 count is below 200 there is a great risk of getting opportunistic infections and treatment is advised. If you are already sick but your CD-4 count is above 200 it can also be advised to start the treatment.

The treatment should only be started if you are well informed. So ask any questions you have before starting the treatment.

❖ You always have to consult a doctor in order to know if it is the right moment to start taking treatment.

## 10. What are the side effects of treatment?

Concerning the side effects it is important to know that:

- Most side-effects are usually mild.
- The risk of serious side effects is small.
- Most people find that treatment becomes an ordinary part of their daily life.

The side effects differ for each drug. The commonly used ART TRIOMUNE, can have a toxic effect on some organs of the body [ example; liver and pancreas]. It can also give a numb or tingling feeling in your feet or hands; this is called 'peripheral neuropathy'.

Other side effects are: skin-rashes, diarrhoea, nausea, tiredness and headache. The nausea, diarrhoea and tiredness often become less after the first few days or weeks.

STOCRIN can make you feel drowsy or irritable but if you take it in the evening it can help to reduce this during the hours you are awake.

Everybody on treatment should get regular blood tests to check for side-effects.

❖ Most people find that treatment becomes an ordinary part of their daily life.

### 11. For how long do I take the treatment?

The treatment is to be taken for an indefinite period of time. As long as there is not yet a cure for HIV, the treatment is not to be stopped. Unless the doctor's check-up shows a reaction to the treatment. The doctor might then decide to change to a different medicine or stop the treatment. Unless this is the case it is important to remember to take the medicine always.

If you forget or stop taking the medicine for some time they will not work. For this reason it is very important to consult the doctor each month before the medicines are finished.

❖ In order not to interrupt the treatment it is important to consult your doctor every month before the medicines are finished.

### 12. Which drugs are available in Cameroon?

Tablets for Adults, Syrup for Children:



TABLETS FOR ADULTS   SYRUP FOR CHILDREN

The names of the drugs available in Cameroon are:

- Triomune 30 and Triomune 40; consisting of Lamivudine, Stavudine and Nevirapine
- Duovir; consisting of Lamivudine and Zidovudine
- Stocrin(=Efavirenz)
- Crixivan (=Indinavir)
- Videx (=Didanoside)

TRIOMUNE is the most commonly used triple therapy, this means there are three drugs combined in one tablet. This is also the treatment that is easiest to take (one tablet in the morning and one tablet in the evening). If you are not responding well to the treatment or if the drugs interact with other medicine you are taking (for example TB-treatment) the doctor might decide to change the treatment.

❖ TRIOMUNE is the most commonly used triple therapy, this means there are three drugs combined in one tablet.

### 13. Where can I get the treatment?

The treatment is not available at every pharmacy. At the moment reliable and safe ART is being sold at centralised places in each province. In the Northwest they are being sold at Mezam Polyclinic, the Day Hospital at the Provincial Hospital both in Bamenda, Bansa **Baptist Hospital in Kumbo, Catholic Hospital Njinikom**. At all these places you will need to have a file before medicines can be issued. The information in the file is only for you, your doctor and counsellor. It is confidential.

In order to get the treatment you have to consult a doctor who is trained in prescribing these drugs and you have to see a counsellor.

There is strict control in the prescribing of these medicines because it is very important that people don't use them in the wrong way or use them temporarily. Because then the effect of the drugs will reduce.

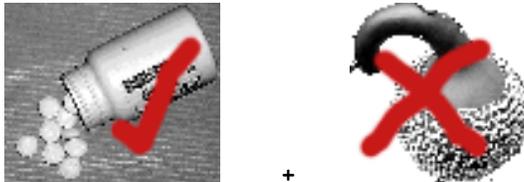
The information inside the files is only for you, your doctor and your counsellor- it is confidential.

### 14. Is it safe to give or sell my medicines to others?

You should not share your medicine or sell to others. The medicine can be very harmful to someone who has not had tests to discover other body weaknesses. Also you will then not have enough for yourself and risk further increase of the HIV in your body.

❖ Do not sell or share your ART with anyone.

### 15. Can I combine traditional medicine and ART?



There are a lot of different traditional treatments and they can be useful in the treatment of a lot of illnesses. Unfortunately we often don't know enough about the interactions from the traditional treatment with the ART. For this reason it is always good to be open to your doctor about which traditional treatment you are taking.

Some people claim they have the cure for HIV and AIDS. Beware of these people. Often there is no proof and they do ask a lot of money for the treatment. In this way people take advantage of you and make money in a fast way.

❖ Beware of people that claim they have the cure for HIV and AIDS.

## 16. Should my partner take treatment?



Every sexual partner of somebody who is HIV-positive should be tested for HIV. If he or she is HIV negative they should abstain from sex or use condoms. And if the partner is also positive he or she should also consult and discuss with the doctor whether or not to start treatment.

If you are both positive it is still advisable to use condoms to avoid giving different strains of HIV to each other.

- ❖ If you are both positive it is still advisable to use condoms to avoid giving different strains of HIV to each other.

## 17. Can I have children?

To this question there is no simple answer.

Each situation is different just as each relationship is different. First of all you have to have unprotected sex in order to get pregnant. If one of the partners is negative this is a risk because you can infect the other. Besides this there is a chance the baby can get infected. A baby that is HIV positive does not have a good resistance and can get very sick. There are medicines to reduce the chance that the baby gets infected. Also you have to consider your own health. Being pregnant costs a lot of energy. If you are thinking about having children it is good to discuss this with your partner, doctor and/or counsellor.

- ❖ If you are thinking about having children it is good to discuss this with your partner, doctor and/or counsellor.

## 18. How can I make sure not to infect others?

The most important way in which HIV is given to somebody else is through sexual intercourse. HIV is not spread by casual, everyday non-sexual contact. The virus can only survive outside the human body for around 1 minute. The virus is in all fluids in the body but only enough to infect somebody in the blood, sperm and vaginal fluids.

For this reason HIV can not be spread by:

- coughing
- using the same utensils
- kissing
- hugging or touching
- mosquito's
- hand-shaking
- toilets

This means you don't have to change your life with your friends or family.

❖ If you are HIV positive you don't have to change your daily life with friends and family.

### **19. Should I talk with others about my HIV-status?**

This is different for everybody. Some people decide to be open about it, others talk about it with a close friend or family member and others only with their doctor or counsellor.

Often people who confide in others don't regret it and get a lot of support and strength out of it. It can help you to feel better and continue with your daily life and it will also help others to know more about HIV and AIDS. If you are still in doubt about who to talk to about your HIV, it is good to talk about these doubts with a counsellor.

If you are a family member or a friend you should respect the trust the HIV-positive person puts in you and support him or her as good as you can.

Remember. HIV/AIDS is not a punishment but an illness.

❖ If you are still in doubt about who to talk to about your HIV, it is good to talk about these doubts with a counsellor.

### **20. Where can I meet other people living with HIV?**

In and around Bamenda there are a lot of people also living with HIV. They are working, going to school, are mothers fathers etc. You will meet them on the streets or on the market but you will not know they are living with HIV. In and outside Bamenda there are different groups of people living with HIV. Often they meet once a week to share information and support each other.

For more information ask the Counsellors in Mezam Polyclinic or in the provincial hospital.

❖ In and outside of Bamenda there are different groups of people living with HIV. Often they meet once a week to share information and support each other.

## MORE INFORMATION

For more information you can always go to the Counsellors at Mezam Polyclinic or the provincial hospital. They are there to answer your questions.

It is also possible to find more information on the internet at the following sites:

- [www.gnpplus.net](http://www.gnpplus.net) (=Global Network of People living with HIV/AIDS)  
www.aids.org
- [www.icw.org](http://www.icw.org) (=The International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS)
- [www.positivelywomen.org.uk](http://www.positivelywomen.org.uk)
- [www.youthHIV.org](http://www.youthHIV.org) (=by and for HIV positive youth and HIV peer educators)
- [www.copaapcam.org](http://www.copaapcam.org) (COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AGAINST AIDS PROGRAMME - CAMEROON)