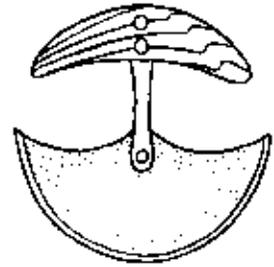


Information for Inuit Community Members

Fact Sheet HIV Viral Load



HIV VIRAL LOAD

What is HIV viral load?

Viral load is a measure of the amount of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in your blood. The lower the amount of virus in your blood (the lower the viral load), the less affected you are by the disease. People with higher viral loads tend to be at greater risk for other infections and quicker progression to AIDS than those with lower viral loads.

Why is measuring viral load important?

On a regular basis your doctor will draw blood to measure the amount of HIV in your system. This viral load measure is important for several reasons.

- 1) If you're not on antiretroviral medications, knowing how much virus is in your system can help you make the decision about whether or not to start taking medications.
- 2) If you are on medications, the amount of virus measured in your system can tell you whether the medications are working and whether or not you should try different medications. The lower the viral load, the better the medications are working.

Can the amount of virus in my blood be reduced to zero?

No. Current medications cannot reduce the virus in your blood stream to zero, and so medications cannot eliminate HIV entirely. The goal of antiretroviral medications is to decrease the amount of HIV below the detectable range. Therefore, if the medications you are using are working well, you are said to have an undetectable viral load. Since the goal is to achieve undetectable viral load, your doctor will likely keep trying different medications until the viral load is undetectable.

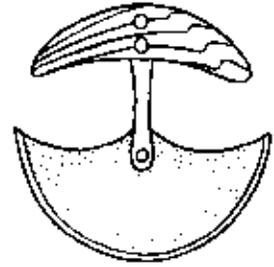
How is viral load measured?

Virus levels are measured in parts per cubic millimetre of blood. For example, if your doctor tells you that your viral load is 1000, it means that he or she has measured 1000 strands (or copies) of virus per cubic millimetre of blood. A detectable viral load (one that doctors can measure) is any viral load that is more than 50 strands (or copies) of virus per cubic millimetre of blood. An undetectable viral load is when there are less than 50 strands of virus per cubic millimetre of blood.



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Does an undetectable viral load mean I can't give HIV to anyone else?

No. An undetectable viral load does not mean this. You can still pass HIV through sharing needles or having unprotected sex. However, having an undetectable viral load does mean that you are much less likely to get sick and develop AIDS.

Does an undetectable viral load mean that the virus is gone from your body?

No. An undetectable viral load, meaning that the virus is below 50 strands of virus per cubic millimetre of blood, means only that this amount is too low for doctors to measure anymore. There is no treatment that can entirely eliminate HIV from the human body.

What is the normal amount of virus in the system of someone who is HIV positive?

The amount of virus in the system of someone who is HIV positive can vary greatly from one person to another. It depends on how long they have had the virus, how well they take care of themselves, whether they are taking medications and if the medications are working. The amount can range from greater than 750,000 copies down to a level less than 50 (or undetectable).

