WHAT IS U=U?

People who achieve and maintain an undetectable HIV viral load do not sexually transmit HIV.

This scientific finding, called “Undetectable = Untransmittable,” or “U=U,” has been promoted as a health equity initiative by the Prevention Access Campaign since 2016 and has been endorsed by the CDC, the NYC DOHMH, the NYSDOH, and many other health departments and experts. U=U asserts that individuals who keep their viral load below the level of assay detection (typically HIV RNA <20 copies/mL) do not pass HIV through sex. Leading scientists have assessed the evidence base as “scientifically sound” [Eisinger RW, Dieffenbach CW, Fauci AS. HIV viral load and transmissibility of HIV infection: undetectable equals untransmittable. JAMA 2019;321(5):451-452.]

EVIDENCE BASE SUPPORTING U=U

- The HPTN 052, PARTNER, PARTNER 2, and Opposites Attract studies followed thousands of male and heterosexual HIV-serodiscordant couples.
- There were no genetically linked HIV transmissions when the partner with HIV was taking ART and was virally suppressed (HIV RNA <200 copies/mL).
- These studies provide robust evidence that individuals do not sexually transmit HIV if they are virally suppressed or have an undetectable viral load.
ENSURING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT U=U

Research has established that certain groups, including sexual and racial or ethnic minority groups, report decreased awareness of or are less likely to be counseled on U=U (see full guideline for references). Care providers are encouraged to make an extra effort to ensure that all patients with HIV are made aware of the importance of U=U and its implications.

COUNSELING INDIVIDUALS WITH HIV ABOUT U=U

Share the message that people who keep their HIV viral load at an undetectable level by consistently taking HIV medications will not pass HIV to others through sex. Sharing this message with all patients can help accomplish the following:

- Diminish stigma associated with having HIV.
- Reduce barriers to HIV testing and treatment.
- Increase HIV testing uptake.
- Inform choices about whether or not to start or continue an HIV prevention method.
- Increase interest in starting and staying on ART.
- Improve self-esteem by removing the fear of being contagious.
- Support healthy sexuality regardless of HIV status.
- Reduce sex partners' concerns.

Encourage patients newly diagnosed with HIV and those previously diagnosed but not taking ART to immediately start (or restart) treatment.

- Explain that doing so will help them avoid damage to their body and immune system and will prevent transmission of HIV to their sex partners.
- The importance of ART should be framed primarily in terms of helping the individual with HIV maintain personal health. Prevention of transmission is a secondary, fortuitous effect of HIV self-care.
- Initiation of ART as soon as possible after diagnosis, even on the same day as diagnosis or at the first clinic visit, improves long-term outcomes, such as virologic suppression and engagement in care at 12 months.

Counsel patients to share information about the research on U=U as follows (proposed language in italics):

- In 4 research studies that involved thousands of couples, no one who was on HIV treatment and whose HIV was undetectable passed HIV to their HIV-negative sex partner.

Counsel patients with virologic blips that U=U still applies to them:

- Reassure patients who may be worried or concerned about virologic blips. Explain that people who have virologic blips do not transmit HIV sexually as long as they continue to take ART consistently.

Advise patients that they can share the following personal information with current or potential sex partners:

- When they last had a viral load test and if their viral load was undetectable.
- If their viral load was detectable but below the level of detection (e.g., HIV RNA of 20 to 200 copies/mL, but can be higher), and is again measured 1 to 2 weeks, and you may pass HIV to your sex partners.
- Explain that doing so will help them avoid damage to their body and immune system.
- People who keep their HIV at an undetectable level will not pass HIV to others through sex.
- If you stop taking HIV medicines, your HIV can rebound to a detectable level within 1 to 2 weeks, and you may pass HIV to your sex partners.
- Keeping your HIV at an undetectable level helps you safely conceive a child with your partner.

GLOSSARY

Viral load suppression: A measured quantitative HIV RNA level <200 copies/mL in blood.

Undetectable viral load: An HIV viral load that is below the level of detection on a specific assay, typically HIV RNA <20 copies/mL to 50 copies/mL.

Durable undetectable: An undetectable viral load maintained for at least 6 months. This indicates that an individual's undetectable viral load is stable and they will not transmit HIV through sex if they continue to adhere to treatment.

Untransmittable: As established by various clinical trials and observational studies, individuals who maintain an undetectable viral load have so little HIV in their blood and other secretions that they have no risk of passing HIV to others through sex.

Virologic blip: When an individual's HIV is initially undetectable on a viral load test, then is at a low but detectable level on a repeat viral load test (usually HIV RNA of 20 to 200 copies/mL, but can be higher), and is again measured at an undetectable level shortly thereafter.

WHAT TO SAY TO PATIENTS ABOUT U=U (PROPOSED SCRIPT)

- Keeping your HIV undetectable helps you live a long and healthy life.
- To get your HIV to an undetectable level and to keep it undetectable, take antiretroviral medicines as prescribed.
- It may take up to 6 months of taking HIV treatment medicines to bring your HIV down to an undetectable level.
- If your HIV is undetectable and you are taking your medications as prescribed, you can be sure you will not pass HIV through sex.
- People who keep their HIV at an undetectable level will not pass HIV to others through sex.
- If you stop taking HIV medicines, your HIV can rebound to a detectable level within 1 to 2 weeks, and you may pass HIV to your sex partners.
- Keeping your HIV at an undetectable level helps you safely conceive a child with your partner.