

HIV Viral Load Testing in Malawi



What You Need to Know



To begin to control Malawi's HIV epidemic, HIV-positive people on antiretroviral treatment must become virally suppressed. This means the amount of virus in the blood is so low that it becomes undetectable. Achieving a state of viral suppression with antiretroviral (ARV) drug treatment will prolong health and largely decrease the ability to pass the virus on to sexual partners.

A viral load test is the recommended tool to determine if the virus is sufficiently suppressed by ARVs or if the medication is not working due to drug resistance.

Currently, in Malawi, uptake of viral load testing is very low. Coverage of viral load testing is only at 27% of the 600,000 people on ARV treatment. Another 400,000 are not even on treatment. The good news is that of the total number who accessed viral load testing in 2016, at least 91% are virally suppressed. There is a need to create demand for viral load testing in Malawi to increase its coverage. To begin to control

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WHY IS A VIRAL LOAD TEST IMPORTANT



As HIV reproduces within the body, the viral load increases. A higher viral load means that HIV is destroying more immune cells (CD4+ T-cells). This compromises one's immunity and lowers the body's ability to fight off infections. One will quickly progress to AIDS and his/her health will deteriorate.

HIV treatment involves taking a combination of HIV medicines (called an HIV regimen) every day. When one takes HIV medicines as prescribed – without defaulting – his/her viral load should reduce, ideally to levels that are undetectable by current laboratory viral load tests. Regular viral load tests are needed to check whether one's treatment is working effectively. Remember that when viral load begins to rise, one may not feel it. Therefore, a rising viral load, detected early through a laboratory test, will enable a doctor to know when one or more of the medicines in the regimen may no longer be working well. Hence, they may change the regimen to keep you healthy.



WHAT IS "UNDETECTABLE" VIRAL LOAD



The laboratory test determines the number of HIV copies per milliliter (mL) in the blood. This can be as high as 1,000,000 copies or they can be so few that they are "undetectable". In general, a viral load will be declared "undetectable" if it is under 1000 copies per mL of your blood, because at that level, depending on the technology used, the laboratory test will not be able to detect the virus.



DOES AN UNDETECTABLE VIRAL LOAD MEAN THAT I NO LONGER HAVE HIV



No. Reaching an undetectable viral load does not mean that you are cured of HIV. It only means that so few copies of the virus are present in the blood that monitoring tests are unable to detect them. Even with an undetectable viral load, an HIV-positive person still has the virus and if they stop taking drugs, HIV will replicate and the viral load will rise again. In some cases, the medicines one has been taking may no longer work because the virus may have developed resistance to them. Drug resistance can also be transmitted from one partner to another.



WHEN/HOW IS A VIRAL LOAD (VL) TEST USEFUL



- AVL test can be used for diagnosis (to determine one's HIV status) since it can detect viral load a few days after HIV infection, unlike the antibody test.
- VL monitoring can be used to predict how easy it is to transmit HIV to someone else. The higher the viral load, the higher the risk of transmitting HIV.
- VL monitoring can help predict how fast HIV disease progresses without treatment. The higher the viral load, the faster the disease progression.
- VL monitoring can be used to manage drug treatment because the test shows how effectively treatment controls the virus. If the treatment isn't working, this is a sign of drug resistance.



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE LIMITATIONS OF THE VIRAL LOAD TEST



- It's estimated that only about 2 percent of the HIV in one's body is in the blood. The viral load test does not measure how much HIV is in body tissues such as the lymph nodes, spleen, or brain.
- Accuracy of the viral load test results can be compromised if one's body is fighting an infection, or if one has just received an immunization (like a flu shot).



WHERE TO ACCESS VIRAL LOAD IN MALAWI



Viral load tests are done at all major central hospital labs such as Queen Elizabeth, Kamuzu and Mzuzu Central Hospitals. You do not need to travel all the way to these facilities. You can do the test at your nearest health facility and they will send the samples to the lab. It may take 6-8 weeks for you to get your results. This is too long! There are also several other laboratories that conduct viral load tests such as DREAM clinics.



TAKE ACTION

IF YOU ARE LIVING WITH HIV:



- Demand a VL test from your provider at your next ARV treatment appointment;
- Ask your provider to explain the results clearly to you;
- Share what you know about the VL test with your peers and motivate them to do it as well;
- Be a champion! Understand challenges of accessing viral load test in your districts and raise the issue with the right individuals such as Ministry of Health.