



Message from  
Dr Ala Alwan  
Regional Director  
WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region  
on the occasion of  
World AIDS Day 2014  
1 December 2014

HIV treatment controls the virus

**TREAT  
FOR LIFE  
PREVENT  
FOR LIFE**

People living with HIV can now live long, healthy and productive lives. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) has become less toxic, easier to administer and easier to take. People living with HIV who take ART in the right combination of medicines can control the virus and bring it down to undetectable levels. This keeps the immune system strong enough to fight opportunistic infections and cancers. Every individual living with HIV has the right to the highest attainable level of health through access, throughout life, to good quality HIV care and treatment.

Effective HIV treatment of this kind will also help people living with HIV to avoid the transmission of their infection to their uninfected partners. Similarly, once the level of their infection has become undetectable, pregnant women living with HIV can give birth without passing the virus on to their babies. Secondary to the preventive benefit to individuals of reducing the virus to undetectable levels, there is a benefit to public health generally. Implementing ART programmes and achieving undetectable virus levels on a large scale reduce the likelihood of transmission from people living with HIV to others. This is a major public health gain that will eventually result in curbing the HIV epidemic.

Efforts to scale up ART in Member States of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region continue. In the past year our region witnessed a 46% increase in the number of people living with HIV receiving treatment, to over 39 000 in 2013 compared to 25 000 in 2012. Though commendable, this effort has yet to result in significantly increasing ART coverage, which remains at below 25% of those in need.

In order to get the most benefit out of the advances in HIV treatment, health systems need to be strong and they need to be able to ensure access to treatment for all those in need. Access to treatment starts with enabling people living with HIV to access testing services, receive a test and know the result. Then, we need to ensure that those who test positive are linked to good quality care and treatment. People who use drugs and other key affected populations in our Region generally have disproportionately lower access to the services they need than the population as a whole. Access to treatment services for infants and children is particularly challenging. Health systems need to be adapted to ensure that even the least privileged and most marginalized individuals are not excluded.

In order to assess the success of our treatment programmes we also need to monitor the success of treatment in individuals. This is done through viral load testing. Unfortunately, in our region, the necessary technology to do this is still lacking in more than half of the countries.

HIV treatment controls the virus. This means that, together, we can end AIDS through providing everyone living with HIV with the opportunity to receive treatment and achieve an “undetectable” viral load. However, it also means that we need to redouble our efforts and refocus our policies, programmes and services to ensure that no one is excluded from treatment.

This is the beginning of the third year since I launched the regional initiative to “End the HIV treatment crisis”. I am certain that as we continue to work together – governments, civil society groups, people living with HIV and international partners – we will be able to achieve this goal. The regional slogan for this year is “HIV treatment controls the virus. Treat for life. Prevent for life”. This is our call for action on the occasion of the World AIDS Day 2014.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ala Alwan'.