

DOCTOR WATITI TOWARDS ZERO



How long can one live a positive life?

Q Dear Doctor,
I am HIV positive and on ARVs but
I am scared because last year I
lost three relatives who were also on the

medicine. One died of TB and two had
cancer. What should I do?

Mary

A Dear Mary,
It is unfortunate that we continue
to lose people living with
HIV. However, the number
of people who die of AIDS-
related causes has reduced
from the hundreds of
thousands we used to lose at
the peak of the epidemic, to
the current figure of about
20,000 lost annually.

This is still unacceptable
and the goal is having
zero AIDS-related deaths
by 2030, but this will only
be achieved when people
are sensitised to screen
regularly for HIV and those
found to have the infection
are put on ARVs immediately
and supported to take the
medicine. This will help them
to have undetectable viral
loads, which means they are
not at risk of dying; but also,

not as infectious as those
who are HIV positive but not
on ARVs. This is because an
undetectable viral load is
undetectable.

We also need to ensure
that all who are negative
are supported to remain
negative by using prevention
methods that are known to
work, such as abstinence
from sex; especially for
school age young people
who are bearing the brunt
of new infections, or being
faithful to partners whose
HIV status is known for
those in sexual relationships.

Other prevention methods
are correct and consistent
condom use or taking of
ARVs pre or post-exposure
prophylaxis. People already
infected like yourself do not
have to live in fear of death,
because the leading causes
of death among people living

with HIV like TB, severe
bacterial infections, cancer
and fungal meningitis are
preventable.

We know they occur
among people who have
what is known as "advanced
HIV disease" (AHD). A
person is said to have AHD
when he or she has a CD4
count of 200 cells/ml of
blood or less, meaning they
have a very badly damaged
immune system, which is
unable to protect them
from serious opportunistic
infections.

Lastly, as you grow older,
you need to be screened
regularly for the so-called
non-communicable diseases
such as high blood pressure,
diabetes and cancer whose
risk increases with age and
many older people end up
dying of the conditions even
when they do not have HIV.