

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

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 untransmittable.

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

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

Mary

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.