

Is fungal meningitis caused by HIV?

Q Dear doctor, I have just lost an aunt who has been living with HIV for a long time and was on ARVs but unfortunately, she stopped taking the medicine but we did not know. We were told she died from fungal meningitis. Is fungal meningitis also caused by HIV?
Henry

D ear Henry,
Fungal meningitis, also known as cryptococcal meningitis is caused by a fungus known as cryptococcus neoformans not HIV. However, there is a relationship between the two, because cryptococcal meningitis is one of the serious opportunistic infections that attack people living with HIV who have what is known as advanced HIV disease (AHD). A person living with HIV is said to have AHD when he or she has a CD4 count below 200 cells/ml of blood. CD4 cells are a type of white blood cells that are part of the immune system, which protects the body from infections. When people living with HIV are not on ARVs, stop taking them or they take the medicine with poor adherence, then their viral load, which is normally suppressed and undetectable while on the drugs rises and their CD4 count drops. This makes them vulnerable to opportunistic infections like cryptococcal meningitis, severe bacterial infections, some cancers and TB, which is the leading cause of death among people living with HIV. That is why it is important for all



people living with HIV to know that antiretroviral therapy (ART) as treatment with ARVs is known, is treatment for life. No one should stop taking his or her ARVs because they are feeling healthy with an undetectable viral load and high CD4 count. Taking ARVs with good adherence does not only prevent AIDS related deaths, but it also prevents new HIV infections; because an undetectable viral load is untransmittable. Therefore, if we are to achieve our goal of ending HIV being a threat to public health by 2030, all people with HIV must be identified, put on ARVs and supported to take the medicine with good adherence; so that they have high CD4 counts and undetectable viral loads. Lastly, it is important for people living with HIV who are on ART to have at least one treatment supporter, a person whom they have disclosed their status to. A treatment supporter helps one by reminding him or her to take their ARVs if needed in case of challenges; such as depression, which is very common among people living with HIV or when one is experiencing stigma associated with the infection.