

WHO Guidelines on HIV-AIDS

What is the issue?

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India has aligned its policy with the guideline of World Health Organisation which recommended that **antiretroviral therapy (ART)** be initiated in people living with HIV irrespective of the **CD4 (a type of white-blood cell) counts**.

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What are the changes made to the guidelines?

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- It was in 2002 that the WHO first issued its ART guidelines. In the absence of AIDS-defining illnesses, the WHO set CD4 count less than 200 cells per cubic millimetre as the threshold to begin ART treatment.

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- Over time, it changed its guidelines and, in 2013, increased the threshold to CD4 count less than 500 cells per cu. mm.

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- In 2015, the WHO once again changed its guidelines. Accordingly, it recommended that ART be initiated in HIV-positive people at any CD4 cell count.

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Why WHO recommended this?

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- The recommendation was **based on the evidence** that an earlier initiation of ART will help people with HIV live longer, remain healthier and “substantially reduce” the risk of them transmitting the virus to others.

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- Thus, based on evidence since 2013, it became clear that an earlier use of ART, irrespective of the CD4 count, **results in better clinical outcomes**.

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- The availability of safer, affordable and easy-to-manage medicines that could help to lower the amount of virus in the blood played a key role in the WHO's decision.
- Earlier initiation could **avert an additional three million deaths** and **prevent 3.5 million more new HIV infections** between 2013 and 2025, noted the WHO in 2013.
- Nearly 4.5 lakh deaths can be averted through this move.

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What are the challenges?

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- As per 2015 estimates, India has 2.1 million HIV-positive people, of which **only 1.6 million have been diagnosed** and about a million are on treatment.
- But over half a million people are not even aware of their HIV status.
- With the government changing its treatment guidelines, the 0.6 million who have been diagnosed but not been on treatment are now eligible for treatment.
- The biggest challenge will be to identify the 0.35 million who have been diagnosed but not on treatment and the 0.5 million who have been infected but have not been diagnosed.

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What is the way ahead?

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- Even as efforts are on to expand the 1,600 treatment delivery sites that are currently operational, **there should be greater focus now on identifying people with HIV.**
- The government has plans to start **community-based testing** to bring it closer to those in need, and **target special groups** that are more vulnerable to infection such as partners of people who are HIV-positive.

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Source: The Hindu

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