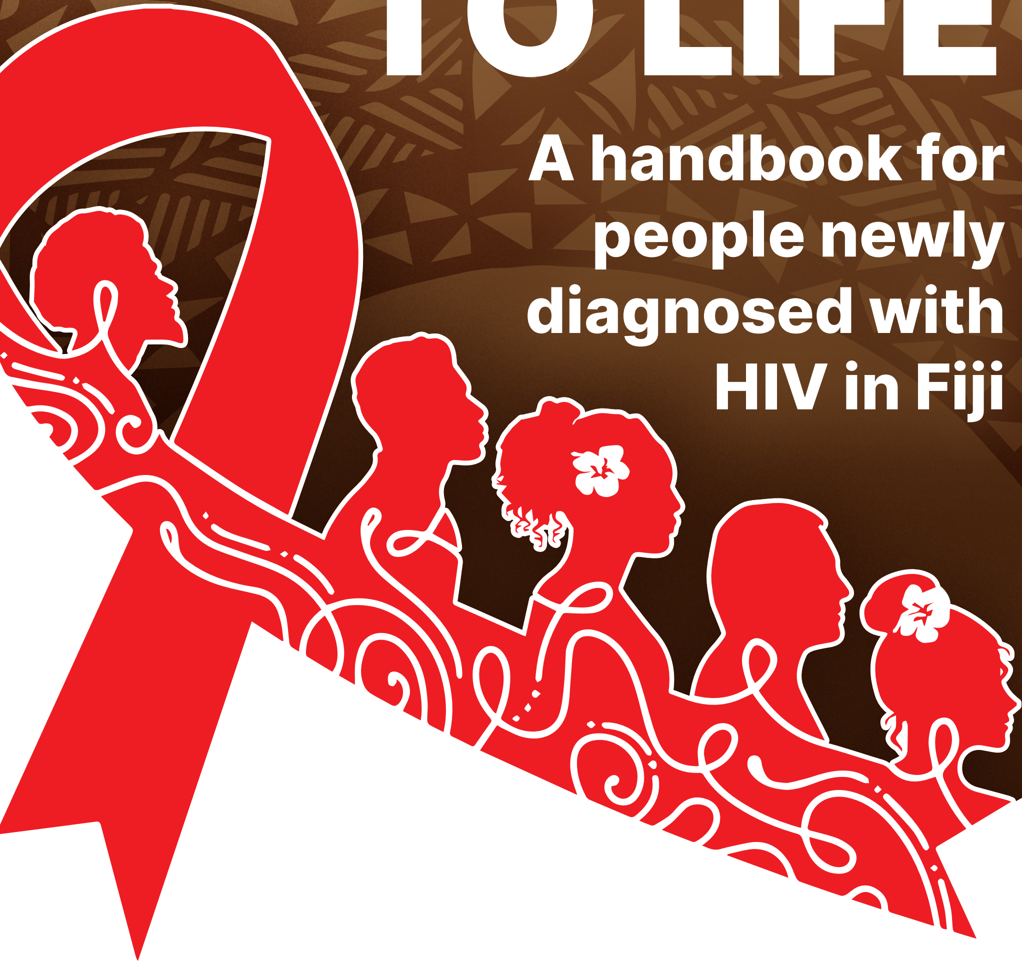
POWER TO LIFE

A handbook for people newly diagnosed with HIV in Fiji



POWER TO LIFE

A handbook for people newly diagnosed with HIV in Fiji

This booklet was developed by the Rainbow Pride Foundation in collaboration with the Believers Support Group of PLHIV, FJN+ Fiji Network of People Living with HIV, UNAIDS Pacific and the Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services HIV HUB Medical Officers. It is adapted from the National Association for People Living with HIV Australia(NAPWHA) with the support of the ASHM . It was contextualised to the Fijian context with funding assistance from the New Zealand High Commission in Suva, Fiji.

Start HIV Treatment As Soon As Possible After Diagnosis

Rainbow Pride Foundation

Title: POWER TO LIFE A handbook for people newly diagnosed with HIV in Fiji

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of PLHIV in the greater Suva area

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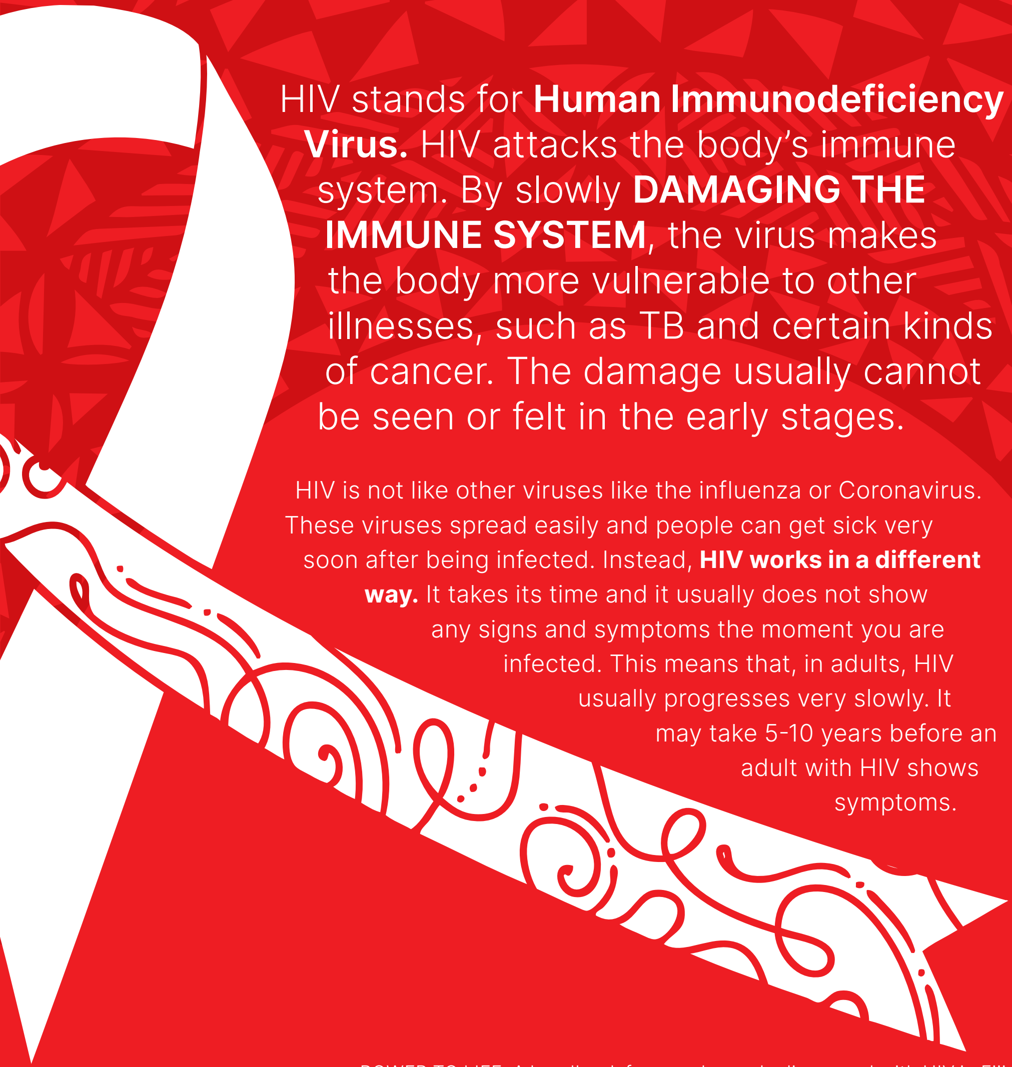
WHAT IS HIV?



HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus.** HIV attacks the body's immune system. By slowly **DAMAGING THE IMMUNE SYSTEM**, the virus makes the body more vulnerable to other illnesses, such as TB and certain kinds of cancer. The damage usually cannot be seen or felt in the early stages.

HIV is not like other viruses like the influenza or Coronavirus. These viruses spread easily and people can get sick very soon after being infected. Instead, **HIV works in a different way.** It takes its time and it usually does not show any signs and symptoms the moment you are infected. This means that, in adults, HIV usually progresses very slowly. It may take 5-10 years before an adult with HIV shows symptoms.

For some adults, the signs and symptoms may show earlier. In children it progresses more quickly, less than two years.

Many people have HIV in their body for years without realising it. People who are HIV positive can feel healthy, and not know that the virus is slowly damaging their immune system. You can't tell if someone has HIV just by looking at them. **To know if you have HIV, you need to have a blood test done.**

It is a good idea to find out as much as possible about HIV around the time that you go for the blood test. Think of all the things you've heard about it over the years, do some reading, chat to people, and **become more HIV knowledgeable.**

HIV KNOWLEDGE

Do you know what is HIV?

HIV takes over and damages an important part of the immune system called CD4 cells. Without treatment, the number or count of CD4 cells in your body gets lower and lower over time. The fewer of these blood cells there are in your body, the more difficult it is for your immune system to do its job of protecting you from invading germs.

What it means is that you become more vulnerable to infections. That is why HIV is called the immunodeficiency virus. Without treatment, the virus will continue to multiply, and your immunity to infection becomes 'deficient'. Other words for this can be that it is 'weak' or 'lacking'. This means that your body will not be strong enough to fight off infections.

It may take some time for this immune system weakness to show itself. Some people get a strong reaction when they are first infected, but not everyone. So, for many years, and without treatment, you would continue to live as before, with no outward signs of change. All the damage is happening inside. The rate at which the damage happens, differs from person to person.

Epeli and Asilika are having a chat. Epeli has been living with HIV for 12 years. Asilika went for a blood test and three weeks ago, the doctor told her that the result was 'positive' – Asilika has HIV. The clinic put her in touch with Epeli, who likes to help other people living with HIV. He is a HIV PEER SUPPORTER.

Asilika: *(looking sad) I should have learned more about HIV long ago.*

Epeli: *Now's a good time to learn more, Asilika. I can tell you a bit more about how things went for me, if you think that would help?*

Asilika: *It would help, Epeli, thanks very much.*

Epeli: *Right from when I was diagnosed, I tried to learn as much about HIV as I could. If I'm going to be living with this virus, I said to myself, I want to know what it is and what it's doing to me. Anything that you read or find out from nurses, doctors, or elsewhere about HIV and treatment, get as much info as you can. Also, I'd be happy to talk about it if you have questions.*

Asilika: *Thanks, Epeli, it feels good having you to talk to someone who understands my status.*

What does a HIV+ diagnosis mean?

If you go for an HIV blood test, and the result comes back 'negative' – that is actually a good thing. It means you do not have HIV. If the doctor says 'it's positive', it means that they have detected HIV in your blood sample and that you are now infected with the virus.

They will probably do a second blood test just to be sure. Do not be afraid or feel scared, do allow them to take a second test if they need to and more importantly go and collect your results when it is ready. If the second test also comes back positive, it's a good time to understand more about what a HIV-positive diagnosis means. Important to remember that while HIV is not curable yet, it can be treated and you can live a long and productive life if you take your HIV medication as per the doctor's orders.

What is the next step after testing positive for HIV?

If you recently learned that you have HIV, you could feel helpless, afraid, and alone. But you're not by yourself. You can get assistance from people and resources, and according to the Fiji Ministry of Health data from 2022, there are 1057 people living with HIV in Fiji.

First STEP: See an HIV and AIDS doctor right away

After learning you have HIV, you could find it difficult to take action due to fear. However, as soon as you become aware of your HIV status, you should seek out a physician with expertise in HIV and AIDS. In Fiji, you can find these HIV medical Specialists at the Divisional HIV/SRH Hubs in Suva, Lautoka, and/or Labasa. Do not delay doing it. Your doctor may perform tests to determine the health of your immune system, the rate of HIV progression, and the general state of your body. Your doctor is able to work with you to determine the most suitable course of treatment, including when and how to start it, using this and other information. HIV medications slow and stop HIV from developing into AIDS. However, if HIV is not treated, it might cause severe sickness.

Second STEP: Get on HIV treatment

Put yourself on HIV medication as soon as you can if you are not already. Your doctor will immediately start treating you using the "Test and Treat" strategy and work with you to create a treatment plan based on the findings of your tests. Keep in mind that Fiji offers free HIV medications.

The medicines used in the more recent treatment regimens shut down the virus in your body more quickly and completely than ever before with few to no side effects, very rare hazardous reactions, and minimal to no adverse effects.

Why get on HIV medications?

Your physical health will improve right away, especially if you were diagnosed after HIV had already weakened your immune system. Any opportunistic infections will likely go away within a few weeks (or a few months at most), as will the strange fatigue you neglected for months.

Second, You'll feel calm. Yes, you have HIV, but you are managing it, which is the first and most crucial step towards leading a regular life again.

Third, the new antiretroviral regimens reduce viral load to undetectable very quickly (often within two to three months), which will make you much less worried, not only about your medical prognosis, but also about having sex.

How can you get support after your HIV diagnosis?

Receiving a diagnosis of HIV can be a life-changing event. But having HIV does not mean you are going to die. Most people with HIV can live long and healthy lives if they get and stay on treatment.

There will be a period of adjustment. People who are newly diagnosed can feel many emotions—sadness, hopelessness, and even anger. Pay attention to your mental health. Your HIV health care provider can help you access mental health services to help you work through the early stages of your diagnosis and begin to manage your HIV.

Talking to others who have HIV may also be helpful. You are not alone. Ask your provider for help finding a local HIV support group. Learn about how other people with HIV have handled their diagnosis.

Asilika: *Weren't you afraid when you got the diagnosis?*

Epeli: *Definitely! I thought the world was coming to an end for me. For a week or so I couldn't focus properly on anything.*

Asilika: *That's exactly how I was feeling.*

Epeli: *Then I started finding out more about HIV. I went online, I spoke to my doctor at the Hub. I got a few pamphlets from Medical Services Pacific and RFHAF. I chatted with friends. Anywhere I could get information. Slowly I started realising that this isn't a death sentence. I can get medicine for it. If I stick to it & strictly follow the doctor's prescriptions, I can live a full life. Once you are on treatment and have an undetectable viral load, it gives you a peace of mind and allows you to also pay more attention to your mind and body in the future. I realised, I am now a person with HIV, and there are many of us and that it is totally OK and nothing to be ashamed of Living.*

Asilika: *Thanks for saying that, Epeli. I'm slowly beginning to think of myself as a 'person living with HIV'.*

Epeli: *Good. You'll see in the pamphlets and so on that they may shorten this to 'PLHIV'.*

CONFIDENTIALITY

The requirement to secure sensitive information and appropriately share trustworthy information is referred to as confidentiality. It is founded on the idea that someone's preferences, decisions, and personal information should be respected. People will not show up for medical care if they perceive that the healthcare personnel do not respect their personal information. To ensure the health of the general population, confidentiality must always be maintained.

Why is confidentiality Important?

The HIV Decree restricts revealing someone's HIV status unless specifically authorised. Given that HIV-positive people are still frequently discriminated against, it is crucial to protect their anonymity. It's likely that people won't get tested or receive treatment for HIV unless they are certain that the information about their test and treatment will remain confidential.

"Don't allow yourselves to be defeated, I know you've heard this a lot but I can confidently say that it's not the end. You can live a healthy life compared to any other normal person and you can plan your future. Take your treatment and listen to your awesome Doctors and Nurses." (FBC NEWS 01 Dec 2021)

Joeli Colati who was first diagnosed at 21 after being contracting HIV from his partner. His knowledge on HIV was very limited when he was diagnosed and assumed his life was over. However, his specialized Doctors assured him that it is very manageable. After a few tests, he was immediately started on treatment and his treatment offers the best chance of preventing HIV from multiplying, which allows his immune system to stay healthy. He stopped treatment in 2011 to pursue herbal treatment, but re-enrolled in ARV treatment after discovering he was gravely ill. Since then, he has been on ARV and has been UNDETECTABLE for ten years, and his immune system is in the same shape as it was before he had HIV. He's not infectious and his chance of passing on HIV to you and to his sexual partner is ZERO!! Now he enjoys life and his career, and he is in a love and sexual relationship with a partner who they both appreciate.

Asilika: *Epeli, What happens to the personal information about me being diagnosed with HIV that is kept at the health centre or the hub? Who will know about my condition? I know one of the nurses who works at the clinic, she is my aunt. I am scared that she will find out and tell my family and others from my village. I don't think that I will be able to go to the clinic if she is working there. I don't want her to know my status. What do I do then?*

Epeli: *It's great that you have questions like this. I also had the same thoughts in my head when I I was newly diagnosed because our main worry right now is our fear of being discovered. I was concerned about what might happen if others found out and how they will behave towards me given that Fiji is a small country where everyone knows almost everyone and where HIV is still highly stigmatised. I'd like to assure you that:*

** Our files are stored under code names, and only the doctor who is attending to you know what they are.*

- *Health care Workers take oaths to keep and maintain confidentiality at all times. This means that it is illegal for them to disclose PLHIV information to others without the consent of the concerned PLHIV. All the health care workers and community health care workers have also been trained on the importance of keeping information about PLHIV private and strictly confidential.*
- *Fiji has the HIV ACT that outline, the consequences of not following these regulations.*

And in this case, since you know someone at the clinic, you can discuss with your doctor what other alternative arrangements you can make to ensure that you continue to see your doctor on your clinic dates and receive care and treatment.

Asilika: *So my information will not be known to others because the doctors and health care workers has a responsibility towards confidentiality?*

Epeli: *Yes, under the HIV Act only you can disclose your diagnosis and status, nobody else has the power to share information about your HIV status but you. If they do, they can be taken to court for ethical breach of their oath and code of practice.*

Asilika: *Thank you Epeli, that information is reassuring and reaffirming.*

DISCLOSURE

The Medical and Health Services Act of 2006 forbids the unauthorised sharing of private medical information, including HIV status. In Fiji, medical staff are mandated by law to protect the confidentiality and privacy of patient information. According to the HIV Act of 2011, any other disclosures should only be made if the PLHIV person is unable to make a face-to-face disclosure and has given written consent. Reasonable grounds for disclosure include sexual partners or family members when the PLHIV exhibits risky behaviour.

Do I need to tell anyone?

In a workplace, it is advised that you only reveal your status to your employer if it is absolutely required, as stigma and discrimination can still exist within the work environment. The Employment Relations Act of 2007 in Fiji forbids discrimination, including that based on a person's health status, although it is always advisable to be on the safe side. Therefore, disclosing your HIV status in Fiji is a personal choice that should be made with careful consideration. It is important to have a support network in place and to only disclose your status if it is absolutely necessary or if you feel comfortable doing so.

Should you tell other people about your positive test result?

It is absolutely optional for PLHIV to disclose their status to anyone; it is not required by law. The decision of whether to disclose one's HIV status should be left up to the individual with HIV. Telling trusted family members and close friends about the situation you are in is suggested, nevertheless, it is critical to assess the benefits and disadvantages of disclosing your status to others.

Partners

Although it is not required by law, it is very important to disclose your HIV status to your sexual partner(s) or anyone you know you may have exposed the virus to. Communicating with each other about your HIV status means you can take steps to keep both of you healthy. For some PLHIV, the more practice you have disclosing your HIV status, the easier it will become.

If you're nervous about disclosing your test result, or you have been threatened or injured by a partner, you can ask your doctor or the local health department to help you tell your partner(s) that they might have been exposed to HIV. This type of assistance is called partner notification or partner services. Health departments do not reveal your name to your partner(s). They will only tell your partner(s) that they have been exposed to HIV and should get tested.

Health Care Providers

Your health care providers (doctors, clinical workers, dentists, etc.) have to know about your HIV status in order to be able to give you the best possible care. It's also important that healthcare providers know your HIV status so that they don't prescribe medication for you that may be harmful when taken with your HIV medications.

Your HIV test result will become part of your medical records so that your doctor or other healthcare providers can give you the best care possible. All medical information, including HIV test results, falls under strict confidentiality laws such as the HIV Act and cannot be released without your permission.

There are some limited exceptions to confidentiality. These come into play only when undisclosed information could result in harm to the other person.

Family and Friends

In most cases, your family and friends will not know your test results or HIV status unless you tell them yourself. While telling your family that you have HIV may seem hard, you should know that disclosure has many benefits—studies have shown that people who disclose their HIV status respond better to treatment than those who do not.

Employers

In most cases, your employer will not know your HIV status unless you tell them. Please note that HIV disclosure is a personal decision and your comfort level and specific circumstances should guide your decision. Consult health care provider, support group or legal professionals who can provide tailored advice based on your situation.

Epeli: *Bula Asilika, How are you today?*

Asilika: *I am great Epeli and you. Thank you for our last conversation on confidentiality, it really helped reaffirmed some things that were bothering me about my personal information. But there is something else that I want to talk about.*

Epeli: *Asilika, I am all ears*

Asilika: *Its been sometimes now that I have known my status, and I want to share it with my parents and close friends but I am afraid of their reaction when they learn about my status.*

Epeli: *Ahh.. Telling someone about who we are and what our HIV status is, is usually difficult, and we are also always worried about everyone else getting to know about it. You know, Asilika, disclosing your status is entirely voluntary, and there is no law requiring you to do so. However, it is always healthy to have a support system with whom you may openly communicate.*

These are some words of caution you should consider before proceeding.

- *Do not let anyone force you to do it, remember it is voluntary.*
- *You must know that you are ready to do it, do not do it if you are not ready.*
- *Look at the risk and assess the pros and cons carefully before revealing your status.*
- *Know that you trust the person that you are going to disclose it to*

Asilika: *Should I disclose my status to my employer, I am afraid that I will be discriminated, stigmatized, treated differently, and will be fired if they know.*

Epeli: *There is no law that states that you should reveal to your employer, unless it is necessary, but the employment relations act of 2007 does not allow discrimination to happen in the work place based on a person's health.*

Asilika: *Aaaahhmmm, thank you for clearing that Epeli, it is helpful to know these things as I was already contemplating in my head how I was going to disclose to my bosses at work but these information you've shared have cleared some of my doubt and fears.*

Epeli: *No worries Asilika, I am glad that I have helped you clear some of those doubts and fears that can also often affect us emotionally and mentally. This is why I am sharing all these important information with you.*

HIV MYTH YOU SHOULD KNOW

More information can be accessed from the MoH Fiji
https://www.health.gov.fj/hivaids/

This is the end of my life

HIV is not a death sentence. With the advances in treatment, most people diagnosed with HIV can expect to live long and actively, much the same as their HIV-negative peers.

My sex life is over

Not true. It's possible to have a sex life while living with HIV and if your on treatment and your viral load is undetectable, you have no risk of transmitting HIV to your partner(s).

I cannot have children

It is possible to have HIV negative babies with ongoing HIV treatment from pregnancy as long as you present early and adhere to the medication regimen.

I will get AIDS

HIV is not AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). It is very rare nowadays for a person with HIV to progress to AIDS due to availability of Anti-Retroviral Treatment (ART), the combination medications that keep your viral load suppressed and undetectable. ART is free and readily available at the SRH/HIV hubs in Fiji. The key is to take ART early on and regularly so that your viral load stay undetectable.

I will experience side effects from HIV treatment

Improvements in treatment mean that most PLHIV will have little or no side effect from their medication. If one type of medication doesn't work for you, there are other possibilities – doctors will continue to try out ART combinations until they find the right one for you.

> **Asilika:** *I noticed yesterday that I've got a rash on my body. I suppose it's the kind of thing we should expect when we live with HIV?*
>
> **Epeli:** *I can't say for sure, of course, but the chances are that it's not HIV. Rashes happen for all kinds of reasons. Some people may develop rash as a reaction to HIV medication, but you're already on medication for a while and it's working well for you.*
>
> **Asilika:** *Thank goodness, it is.*
>
> **Epeli:** *If your rash stays, and especially if it gets worse, it will be a good thing to go to the clinic and get it checked out.*
>
> **Asilika:** *Thanks, I did think about that, but will wait a few more days.*
>
> **Epeli:** *It was like that with me too, you know. In the year or two after my diagnosis, I became much more aware of my body. About my health in general, really. I started noticing all kinds of things that I'd never noticed before, and often thought, just like you said, 'I suppose it's the kind of thing to expect when living with HIV'. In the early days, before ART, when people's immune systems were getting weaker and weaker, things such as rashes and lumps and swelling were a real cause for concern. They could have been a sign of an opportunistic infection, you know, what you've read about in the pamphlets on HIV?*

Asilika: *Yes I read that that's what happens when your immune system has become weaker from the HIV and that your body finds it more difficult to fight off infections.*

Epeli: *Quite right. But as we talked about the other day, with the treatments available now, our immune systems should be as strong as anyone else's. Of course, we're still going to get all kinds of infections like everybody else, and we have to deal with them. But it's unlikely to have anything to do with HIV itself, or with the effects of the HIV medications. But if there are persistent infections or other ailments that continue to affect you while taking the medication, it is recommended that you go and see one of the HIV Hub doctors to talk about i.*

HIV TREATMENT

A main goal of HIV treatment is to reduce a person's **viral load** to an undetectable level. An **undetectable viral load** means that the level of HIV in the blood is too low to be detected by a **viral load test**. People with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of transmitting HIV to their HIV-negative partners through sex. ART is recommended for everyone who has HIV. People with HIV should start taking HIV medicines as soon as possible. ART cannot cure HIV, but HIV medicines help people with HIV live longer, healthier lives. ART also reduces the risk of HIV **transmission**. "YOU WILL DIE EARLY FROM AIDS-RELATED DEATH IF YOU DO NOT TAKE IT" and you will be exposed to alot of co-Infection such as boils, rashes, TB which will build up and if left untreated can lead to premature AIDS-related death.

When & why HIV treatment?

ART is recommended for everyone who has HIV. People with HIV should start taking HIV medicines as soon as possible. ART cannot cure HIV, but HIV medicines help people with HIV live longer, healthier lives. ART also reduces the risk of HIV **transmission**.

The treatment for HIV is called **antiretroviral therapy (ART)**. ART involves taking a combination of HIV medicines (called an HIV **treatment regimen**) every day.

The goal of HIV treatment is to achieve and maintain a low level of virus in the body resulting in being fully suppressed or **undetectable viral load**. When, as a PLHIV, you go regularly for blood tests, this helps them to keep track of two important things:

- Your CD4 count – a measure of how strong your immune system is
- Your HIV Viral Load – a measure of how much HIV is in your blood

Taking ART every day without missing any dose means that the ART medication will continue to effectively control the virus. When it is suppressed, HIV can't do any further damage, and your immune system can become strong again. This will allow you to continue to live a normal productive life without worrying about succumbing to AIDS-related illnesses.

If your viral load becomes undetectable, it also means that you cannot transmit HIV to another person. This is known as **Undetectable = Untransmissible** or **U = U**. By taking ART, you are not only doing good to yourself, but also to others. You are doing your bit in the fight against HIV.

Epeli: *There is a lot of information available on ART particularly on the web. Try not to let it overwhelm you. I got terribly confused, and even a bit afraid of treatment when I realised it's a lifelong thing – once you start, you have to keep it up, every day. For me, once I accepted that, I was ready to start the medication. If you are ever in doubt about the ART you have been prescribed or notice any changes to your body after taking your medication, do not hesitate to ask any of the HIV doctors at the Hub.*

Asilika: *So after they put you on ART, what has happened then?*

Epeli: *It was hard at first trying to remember to take my medication on a daily basis but I got the hang of it and it became part of my daily routine! Within six months, my HIV blood test showed an undetectable viral load and I was literally over the moon about it. I now have a suppressed viral load which means that I am not going to be able to transmit HIV to my sexual partner. I also feel great and strong! How cool is that?*

Asilika: *Yes, the Doctor was saying the other day that if I follow my prescriptions and take those daily dosages, we can expect my blood test to show an undetectable viral load after six months. But do I stop taking the medication then? After achieving an undetectable viral load?*

Epeli: *(laughs) Warai buna, you will need to take the ART for life, which means everyday till you leave this world! Like I mentioned before, it hardly has any adverse side effects but if you do face any, go and see your HIV doctor immediately. The main aim of getting on treatment early and taking it regularly is so that you can reach the undetectable level within the shortest period of time (usually within six months).*

The "treatment as prevention" campaign U=U means Undetectable=Untransmissible. We (PLHIV) therefore can STOP the SPREAD OF HIV in our community by getting to that Undetectable viral load soonest and stay undetectable forever.

HERBAL MEDICINE

The medical application of plant materials such as roots, leaves, flowers, and bark is known as herbal medicine. While some herbal remedies have been shown to be useful for some symptoms or illnesses, there is currently NO CURE FOR HIV, and NO HERBAL REMEDY has been proven to cure HIV or to be a safe substitute for ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY (ART).

Natural remedies can interact with ART drugs and other prescribed therapies in certain circumstances, causing potentially dangerous negative reactions or lowering therapy effectiveness. Before using any herbal supplements or other medications, people living with HIV should consult their doctor to be sure they are safe to take and will not conflict with their ART.

How can Herbal Medicine Help?

While herbal therapy may have some advantages in terms of symptom management and overall health, it is not a replacement for traditional medical therapies like ART, which is scientifically proven to significantly prolong the lives of individuals living with HIV and lower the risk of transmission to others. It is essential to obtain the opinion of a knowledgeable healthcare expert before utilizing any herbal product or cure. In Fiji, the only safest option to treat HIV is via ART and no other means. Herbal treatment has not cured any PLHIV in Fiji of HIV. It may help with treating symptoms but not rid your body off HIV.

Epeli: *Bula Vinaka Asilika, it has been a while since we last met, how are you?*

Asilika: *Good, I am aware that I have not been coming and did not attend our arranged meeting a couple weeks ago... I've been seeking alternative treatment from traditional healers, and I was given herbal roots and stems to combine and drink every morning and afternoon.*

Epeli: *and how did that go Asilika?*

Asilika: *at first it felt good because it was healing my boils and sore throat but after a while it all came back.*

Epeli: *It's great that you returned when you had that thought so we could continue our talk. In all honesty, ART is the only treatment that comes close to curing HIV. I can recall being in the same situation and looking for alternative Fijian cures, some help with some of my symptoms but I just ended up getting worse because herbal medicine is not scientifically proven to be able to treat HIV. Some of the symptoms may be relieved by herbal treatments, but it won't be long before they all return, some would be worse than before. Different individual will experience different outcomes but it is always good to talk to the Doctors about it.*

Asilika: *So the only medication that can stop your body from further developing any symptoms of HIV is the ART?*

Epeli: *Yes, and that is why ART is so important for us because it will help our body rebuild and strengthen our immune system thus allowing our body to fight off any disease and illness. So you will remain healthy and continue to be productive.*

Asilika: *Thank you Epeli, that really helped explain why I continued to suffer from certain illnesses even after the herbal treatment seemed to make some of them go away temporarily. Im going to stick my ART from now onwards.*

MENTAL HEALTH FOR PLHIV

When you learn you have HIV, you may experience a range of emotions. “How long do I have to live?” is a common question. There are individuals who blame themselves, while others would hate the world for being so cruel. Some people experience a sense of relief that they can now be certain of their HIV status. Following a diagnosis, it’s normal to also experience feelings of fear, anxiety, worry, guilt, shame, embarrassment, wrath, or despair.

It’s possible that you worry about what other people will think. You might worry that others will judge you, bully you, or even treat you unfairly. Such emotions are acceptable and understandable. Having these worries and fears is not a sign of weakness.

The impact of all of this on your mental health should be acknowledged, though, at the same time mental health issues can have a negative impact on your quality of life because they change the way you think about yourself and the world around you. It can affect how you behave at work and at home if you have ongoing mental health issues. They may make it difficult to take the medications as prescribed. They might prevent you from taking care of yourself.

You may take care of your mental health in a number of ways. Learning to recognise and accept your feelings is a crucial first step in improving how you handle them. It is crucial that you let your doctor or PLHIV peer navigator know if you are having any mental health problems so that they can direct you to the proper resources and services for care.

Asilika: *I’ve been feeling very down this week.*

Epeli: Let’s talk about this, because I can tell from the sadness in your eyes and the way you’re carrying your shoulders this morning that things aren’t going well for you. How are you feeling?

Asilika: *Tired and anxious. I’ve been thinking too much and stressed out about everything, sometimes overthinking things and I continue to blame myself for being in this predicament. Im worried about my family and friends knowing about my status. I get emotional at the simplest things and have not been sleeping well.*

Epeli: *It’s good that you share this with me, Asilika. I can imagine the stress you feel with all the negative feelings swirling around in your head. And- then the tiredness and not sleeping well can really make every day a struggle.*

Asilika: *It’s exactly like that for me now.*

Epeli: *For us as PLHIV, our mental health is just as important as our physical health. In the same way as we take medications to treat HIV and stay undetectable, there are things we can do to better handle those negative feelings.*

Asilika: *How do you deal with them?*

Epeli: *Firstly, I always leave the door open to find professional help if I feel things are getting too much. But to avoid getting to that point, I make my own wellbeing a project! I take care of myself. Eat well and regularly. Get some exercise every single day. Socialise and stay connected with people. Am careful about drinking too much. Try to deal with problems early on so that things don’t build up. I celebrate small victories, such as fixing that thing in the house I’ve been putting off for months (both laugh). All of this helps me to sleep better.*

SELF-CARE AS A PLHIV

Living with HIV is made easier not only by taking HIV medication on a regular basis, but also by taking care of oneself in many ways. It will be easier for us to care for others if we first take care of ourselves. You know best what is good for your health and how best to take care of yourself.

Here are some things that work for a lot of people:

- Get a good night's sleep, every night.
- Stop smoking and know your limits when it comes to alcohol.
- Eat well, do regular exercise, and keep to a healthy weight.
- Keep on top of all the things demanding your attention – your family, your finances, your job, maintenance around the house and garden, your paperwork – so that you don't get stressed and feel overwhelmed
- Have a good relationship with your doctor.
- Be aware of all the medicines and therapies you are taking. Talk to your doctor before starting any other medication, also herbal therapies.
- Think about all areas of your health and wellbeing.
- Do nice things for yourself every now and again – take a walk next to the river, paint a picture, listen to your favourite music, go to a concert... whatever it is you enjoy
- Spend some time with other PLHIV – nobody else knows better what you are going through.

Epeli: *Nice to see you again, Asilika. What have you been up to?*

Asilika: *Good to see you too, Epeli. I've actually been having a great time recently. It got into my head that I wanted to learn more about our music here on the island, and went to listen to a few of our local bands. The next thing I knew, I went out and got a second-hand guitar, and am learning to play!*

Epeli: *What a great thing to do! I'm impressed. You know, I've always wanted to play a musical instrument myself, but was always afraid that I wouldn't be good enough. The guitar also seems so big and difficult to play.*

Asilika: *You can always try the ukulele.*

Epeli: *You think so?*

Asilika: *Of course, you'd love it. I tell you what, I'll ask around and see where we can find a ukulele for you. You can learn the basics, I'll help you, and after a while we can play together. Who knows, once we've learned some songs, we can sing to the others at the next positive people's meeting! (Both laugh)*

Epeli: *You see, now I'm learning something from you as well.*

PREVENTION OF MOTHER TO CHILD TRANSMISSION

Mother-to-child transmission of HIV is the transmission of HIV from an HIV-infected mother to her child during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding. Without intervention, HIV-infected women will transmit HIV to their children during pregnancy, labor, delivery, or breastfeeding. However, with effective interventions, the risk of mother-to-child transmission can be reduced.

Early detection and treatment of HIV, combined with effective prevention of mother-to-child transmission strategies, has led to a significant decline in new HIV infections in children worldwide.

Ms Jokapeci Tuberi Cati who has been living with HIV for 21 years. She contract the virus from her husband who passed away in 2002. She remarried in 2004 to Emosi who was also PLHIV. They bore 3 children. All of them were negative as Tuberi was taking ARV pre, during and after pregnancy. She had a safe delivery and provided Formula milk to her kids instead of breastfeeding. She has been on ARV for 8 years and her husband have been taking ARV for 19 years now and have had U=U for the same period. Her kids are now grown, healthy and her and the husband are running their own business.

(The Fiji Times, 04, Dec 2015)

"There are children who are HIV positive or whose parents are HIV positive and they need to be given equal treatment.

"They need to be supported and given positive reception from those around them. Don't give them special treatment but equal treatment, so they do not have to feel discriminated or stereotyped."

"I am so glad I knew my status because it has changed me fundamentally for the better, there, is no fear in knowing your status so I always emphasize this first step of knowing."

Prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV can be done through a combination of strategies

1. **Antiretroviral therapy (ART) for HIV-infected pregnant women:** ART can reduce the amount of HIV in the mother's blood, thus reducing the risk of transmitting the virus to her child during pregnancy, labor, or delivery.
2. **Continued care and treatment for mothers and their children:** HIV-infected mothers and their children should continue to receive care and treatment to maintain their health and well-being
3. **Anti-HIV prophylaxis for the newborn child:** Administering antiretroviral medications to the newborn child immediately after birth can also reduce the risk of transmission.
4. **Avoid breastfeeding:** Use safe and affordable alternatives to breast milk, mothers living with HIV should avoid breastfeeding, as the virus can be transmitted through breast milk.
5. **Delivery by Caesarean section:** If the mother's viral load is high, a scheduled delivery by Caesarean section before labor starts may also reduce the risk of transmission.

Asilika: *Bula Epeli, how are you? So, for the past few days, I've been thinking about my future, now that I'm living with HIV, and I know I'm not getting any younger now that I can live a full and enjoyable life (Smile). What if I find a partner who understands my situation and wants to have children?*

Epeli: *It's great to hear you've thought about your future options, as this was a limitation for us PLHIV in the past, when we thought things would just fall apart with nothing to live for. Telling ourselves that this is the end of our lives, that my sex life has come to an end, and that I will not have children.*

Asilika. *I know these thoughts has also being troubling my mind (Laugh).*

Epeli: *Because you are adhering to your medication, it is likely that your viral load or the HIV in your blood will be suppressed and will continue to remain suppressed if you continue to take it as per the doctor's advice. Having this gives a greater chance of you not transmitting it to your partner and preventing you from passing it on to your child.*

Asilika: *This is very helpful, Epeli, and it also clarifies some of my concerns about having children while not transmitting HIV to them.*

Epeli: *It is now recommended that PLHIV mothers or mothers who discovered their HIV status during their pregnancies begin ARV 24 weeks into the pregnancy if they have not already. It is also recommended that you do not breast feed during this period but use alternative breast milk. Many PLHIV mothers in Fiji have delivered healthy babies who were not positive because their viral load was suppressed, their delivery was handled with extreme care and their babies are on formula.*

Being connected to a PLHIV group or someone living with HIV can tremendously help in your overcoming some initial fears and anxieties that are associated with. being recently diagnosed with HIV. Knowing that other people are going through or have gone through this same journey reassures you that you are not alone. There are people out there ready to assist you. All you've got to do is to let them know.

PMTCT Disclosure

Considering the risk of HIV transmission, it is suggested that people living with HIV tell their sexual partner(s) about their diagnosis. The medical officer must help the individual by collaborating with a skilled therapist who understands their current circumstances. After receiving written consent from the PLHIV, sexual partners should be informed and offered counselling, testing, and any other relevant preventative and psychosocial therapy.

The health care work must obtain approval from the permanent secretary of health to notify the sexual partner if a month has lapsed at the HUB Centres and two weeks for all PPTCT patients after three counselling sessions and consent from PLHIV has not been obtained. Consent can be conveyed by consent or email and must be recorded.

SUBSTANCE USE AND HIV RISK

Sharing and reusing needles, syringes, or other injecting tools (or “works”), such as cookers, can increase your risk of contracting HIV or spreading hepatitis B and C or hepatitis C if you inject drugs. For the reason that blood, which might carry HIV, may be present in the needles, syringes, or other instruments. For the same reason, you shouldn’t share your needles, syringes, or tools for injecting silicone, hormones, or steroids.

Can using drugs increase your chances of getting or transmitting HIV?

Yes. Using drugs affects your brain, affect your judgment, and lowers your shyness. When you use drugs, you may be more likely to make decisions that increase your chance of getting or transmitting HIV. **These include having anal or vaginal sex without HIV prevention tools, such as HIV prevention and treatment medications or condoms, having sex with multiple partners, or exchanging sex for drugs.**

Here are some commonly used substances and their link to getting or transmitting HIV:

Alcohol Excessive drinking, notably binge drinking, is linked to behaviors that increase your chance of getting or transmitting HIV, like having condomless sex without using HIV prevention or treatment medications. It could also lead to missing doses of these medications, which can make them less effective.

Opioids Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain, including the illegal drug heroin, the synthetic opioid fentanyl, and prescription painkillers like oxycodone. These drugs are often injected, and people who share needles, syringes, or other injection equipment have an increased chance of getting or transmitting HIV. Opioid use also has been associated with other behaviors that can increase your chance of getting or transmitting HIV, such as exchanging sex for drugs or money to buy drugs, having multiple sex partners, having condomless sex without using HIV prevention or treatment medications, or missing doses.

Methamphetamine Meth is a powerful, highly addictive stimulant. It can be smoked, snorted, injected, or taken orally and is often used with other substances. People who inject meth and share needles/syringes and other injection equipment have an increased chance of getting or transmitting HIV. Some people use meth to enhance their sexual experience, known as chemsex (or “partying and playing”), which often involves multiple partners and is linked to condomless sex, sex without HIV prevention or treatment medications, or missing doses.

Cocaine Cocaine is a stimulant that can be used as a powder or in its crystal form (“crack”). Injecting cocaine, crack, or multiple substances can increase your chance of getting or transmitting HIV if you share needles and other injection equipment.

Club Drugs Club drugs are a group of drugs that act on your central nervous system and affect your mood, awareness, and behavior. Some of the most common club drugs are MDMA, GBH and GBL, ketamine, and others. These drugs are associated with chemsex.

PEER SUPPORT

People who are HIV positive have a long history of helping and supporting one another and we refer to this as peer support. It can be rather informal at times. A friendship starts when two people meet, perhaps during a gathering for individuals with hope.

It can also be a more formal arrangement. Usually with the help of a community organisation, a peer supporter can share knowledge and provide emotional, social and practical help to another PLHIV over a period of time and on a regular basis.

Rebecca Kubunavanua who has been living with HIV for [17] years. She contracted HIV from her later husband and was diagnosed in 2006. They had [5] children who were all HIV negative because she underwent PMTCT whereby she was taking ARV pre, during and after pregnancy and she also had a caesarean and provided formula milk instead of breastmilk to her daughters when they were babies. She has been taking ARV for [12] years now and lives a healthy and productive life. She just recently joined Medical Services Pacific as a Counselor. Rebecca also has a granddaughter who is 2months old and she continues to live positively and happily

(The Fiji Time 02 Dec 2015)

“I was diagnosed in 2006 and it was difficult for me because I never believed this could happen to me and I found it hard to accept the fact that I was living with HIV, It was not easy for me especially having to look after my children but I thank God that my family stood by me.”

“But I was blessed and very fortunate that my family supported me from the first day of being diagnosed with HIV.

There could also be peer support groups that get together on a regular basis. The same kinds of help and support are shared among the group members, maybe facilitated by a health worker or social worker.

Why is peer support so valuable?

Mainly it’s about sharing experiences, insights and feelings that only those living with the virus can have. There’s a shared identity and a shared acceptance. There’s the ability to learn directly from the **lived experiences** of others.

Peer support is especially important in the period soon after diagnosis. It helps to know that you’re not alone. If you haven’t done so already, why not reach out for support from other PLHIV.

> **Asilika:** *I just wanted to thank you for all the help you’ve given me over the past few months.*
>
> **Epeli:** *Thanks, Asilika, it’s been great to be able to share this early part of your journey with HIV with you. It’s not only been one direction. When I was planning to share information with you or follow up on your questions, I also had to make sure that I was keeping up to date with things. Besides, I’ve learned a lot from you too, just the way you handle things, your openness to new experiences. And, of course, we’ve been playing music together!*
>
> **Asilika:** *Loving it. What I’ve found most helpful with you right from the start...and I didn’t feel this way with my doctor or the nurses...it’s that I could be one hundred percent sure that you would never judge me for being HIV positive.*

Epeli: *You're right about that. It was the same for me too, when I was able to talk openly with another positive person for the first time. Such a relief. Then it's also about sharing feelings of hope and empowerment. About opening up about the more difficult feelings, like blaming and shaming myself. All the while knowing that the peer understands perfectly well what you are saying and what you may be going through.*

Asilika: *Just what I experienced with you as well.*

Epeli: *Maybe, whenever you're ready, you'd think about being a peer supporter yourself?*

Asilika: *Oh sure I'll definitely consider that!*

Christopher was diagnosed in 2013 and now positively living with HIV for 10 years. Overwhelmed with fear and doubts, he never let it bring him down as his faith kept him going and he consistently requested to start with treatment right away. He is a strong advocate for HIV, mental health and LGBTQI+ rights and issues. Now he lives a happy and healthy life that understand HIV and the importance treatment.

(The Fiji Sun 03 Dec 2017)

"HIV before meant extreme illness and death – the unknown was terrifying. Now thanks to medication and research, I live a very healthy and happy life.

"One message that I would like to echo out – you are not alone in this fight – there's always someone out there who is also going through the same storm as you… but it does not mean that you should give up"

REFERRAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

Peer Support

PLHIV Suport Contact	Names	Contact
North	**Temo Sasau**	☎ 836-9535 @ tsasau@gmail.com
West	**Rebecca Kubunavanua**	☎ 926-6732 @ rebeccakubunavanua@gmail.com
Central	**Tuberi Cati**	☎ 282-8299 @ catijokapeci@gmail.com
	Joeli Colati	☎ 291-2214 @ joelicolati@gmail.com
	Chris Lutukivuya	☎ 8703552 @ chrislutukivuya@gmail.com

Hub Center Service Provision

Health Care Support	Names	Contact
Lautoka Hub	**Dr Lavenia**	📍 Naviti Street, Lautoka, Fiji. ☎ 664 0243
Labasa Hub	**Dr Wise**	📍 Ratu Raobe Building, Ground floor of Revenue and Customs Building, Labasa, Fiji 📱 881 2525
Central Hub	**Dr Jenni**	📍 RodWell Road Suva ☎ 331 9078

Key Populations Organisation

Peer Support	Contact Details
Rainbow Pride Foundation - Runs HIV Peer Education program specifically targeted at Men who have sex with men (MSM) and Transgender (TG) persons - Provides condoms & lubricants - Conducts HIV outreach programs in the communities and at events - Runs Point of Care (rapid) and community-led testing - Creates *talanoa* spaces for PLHIV from key pops - Runs training programs on HIV/STI prevention - Offers peer counselling - Run HIV prevention campaigns	📍 Lot 203 Ratu Sukuna Road, Suva, Fiji ☎ 3317103 📱 9187474 @ rainbowpridefiji@gmail.com

Peer Support	Contact Details
Survival Advocacy Network - Runs HIV Peer Education program specifically targeted at Sex Workers (SWs) - Distribute condoms & lubricants - Conducts HIV outreach to SWs on the streets - Offers a space (half way home) for sexworkers - Creates *talanoa* spaces for PLHIV from SW community - Runs training programs on HIV/STI prevention specifically focused on SWs.	📍 Lot 4, Luke Street ☎ 930 7653 @ naitala.sesenieli@yahoo.com

Available Services

Service Provider	Contact
Medical Service Pacific (MSP) - *MSP exists to enable women, youth and children to have greater access to reproductive health care for successful family planning; and to support vulnerable populations in the Pacific*	**MSP Suva** 📍 Waimanu Rd, Suva ☎ (+679) 3315295 Suva Office ☎ (+679) 450 2907 / 4502908 Suva Clinic
	MSP Labasa 📍 Lot 11 Naiyaca Sub Division, Labasa ☎ (+679) 881 1308 Labasa Office ☎ (+679) 450 2909 Labasa Clinic
	MSP Lautoka- Fiji 📍 Lot 49 Yawini Street, Lautoka ☎ (+679) 6660595 Lautoka Office ☎ (+679) 2224595/ 7500595 Lautoka Clinic

Service Provider	Contact
Empower Pacific - *To empower individuals and communities to reach their full potential by providing access to professional holistic health and social development services.*	**Lautoka Counselling Centre** 📍 (Lautoka Hospital – Beside Ante Natal Clinic), Old Hospital Road, Lautoka ☎ +679 773 0010 @ bm.lautoka@empowerpacific.com
	Nadi Counselling Centre 📍 Old Hospital Road, Nadi. ☎ +679 776 0018
	Suva Counselling Centre 📍 CWM Hospital (next to the Diabetic Clinic) Waimanu Road, Suva. ☎ +679 778 0015 @ bm.suva@empowerpacific.com
	Labasa Counselling Centre 📍 (Soqosoqo Vakamarama Building) Hospital Road – Opposite Court House, Labasa. P.O BOX 4055, Labasa. ☎ +679 776 0017 @ bm.labasa@empowerpacific.com

Service Provider	Contact
Legal AID • *To provide free legal aid services to those members of the public who cannot afford the services of a legal practitioner.* **To provide greater access to justice through quality legal aid services:** • *To those who are unable to afford such assistance, including women, children and those with special needs;* • *By raising awareness on legal rights and the Constitutional right of access to legal aid services;* • *By creating a work environment whereby the Legal Aid Commission becomes an employer of choice and provides professional, efficient and quality services;* • *By making representations to Government on legal aid matters; and*	**Suva (Headquarters)** 📍 41 Loftus Street, Legal Aid Building ☎ (679) 331-1195 / 331-1954 / 331-3279 📱 (679) 992-3886 / 998-0902
	Nasinu 📍 Valelevu Complex ☎ (679) 339-0390 / 339-0693 📱 (679) 992-4037 / 9928734
	Nausori 📍 Level 1 YM Haniff Arcade ☎ (679) 347-0003 / 347-0004 📱 (679) 992-2158
	Navua 📍 Romatanitobua Complex ☎ (679) 346-0012 📱 (679) 998-2384
	Lautoka 📍 Level 1, Magistrate's Court Complex Tavewa Avenue ☎ (679) 665-001 / 665-0084 📱 (679) 992-2154
	Nadi 📍 1st Floor, Units 10-13 GT Plaza, Nadi ☎ (679) 670-0030 📱 (679) 992-2583
	Sigatoka 📍 Level 1, Magistrate's Court Complex, Sigatoka ☎ (679) 650-0172 📱 (679) 992-6080

Service Provider	Contact
- *By ensuring that the Legal Aid Commission operates in accordance with best international practices.*	**Ba** 📍 Magistrate’s Court Complex Old Bridge Road ☎ (679) 667-8000 📱 (679) 992-2386
	Tavua 📍 1st Floor, Dalpat Singh Building Opposite Tavua Magistrate Court Nasivi Street ☎ (679) 668-0102 📱 (679) 998-2369
	Rakiraki 📍 1st Floor, Naidu Investments Limited Building Vaileka Sub Division Main Street ☎ (679) 669-4001 📱 (679) 992-5838
	Labasa 📍 Old Court House Building Jaduram Street ☎ (679) 881-5118 📱 (679) 992-1146
	Savusavu 📍 Level 1, Vunilagi House Main Street ☎ (679) 885-3103 📱 (679) 998-2380

Protect others from becoming HIV-Positive

If you have HIV, even if you don't feel unwell, you can still spread the infection to others. Sharing needles or having intercourse without protection are two ways this might occur. By using condoms and sterile needles, you can safeguard other people. You can shield yourself against other HIV strains by doing this. Additionally, refrain from giving blood.

During pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding, if you're a woman, you could pass HIV to your child. To protect your child, find out from your doctor what you can. The spread of infection to babies can be prevented with effective treatment. Uninfected sexual partners can take a daily tablet called PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) for further HIV protection. Additionally, biweekly (every other month) injections of PrEP are now accessible.

A great advantage of getting on HIV treatment, in addition to protecting one's own health, is that those with undetectable virus loads will not transmit HIV to others (at least sexually). However, the use of condoms should always be considered because of possible lapses in therapy (during which one could transmit HIV to others) and the potential for (bidirectional) transmission of other STIs.

* My Rights Under the **Fiji HIV Act 2011** PLHIV should not be discriminated against for employment, access to health services or any other service and should receive free HIV treatment for life.

PLHIV are required to be responsible and share their status with sexual partners and practice safe sex.

rainbow PRIDE FOUNDATION FIJI

NEW ZEALAND
HIGH COMMISSION
Te Aka Aorere

FJN+ FIJI Network Plus

MINISTRY of Health
Shaping Fiji's Health

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JOINT UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON HIV/AIDS
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