

Using the U=U Public Health Argument in Advocacy for People Living with HIV

AIDS Watch 2021

“Advocates should be equipped to use the so-called public health argument from U=U in advocacy to increase access and remove barriers to quality health care; ensuring people with HIV have the treatment and services they need to achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load not only saves lives, but also is an effective way to prevent new transmissions.”

THE
LANCET

Call to action: how can the US Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative succeed? Chris Beyrer, MD, MPH Adaora Adimora, MD, MPH; Sally L. Hodder, MD; Ernest Hopkins; Greg Millett, MPH; Sandra Hsu Hnin Mon, MSPH; Patrick S. Sullivan, DVM, PhD; Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH; Anton Pozniak, MD, FRCP; Mitchell Warren; Bruce Richman, EdM., JD; Raniyah Copeland, MPH; Kenneth H. Mayer, MD – February 18, 2021

➤ What is the U=U public health argument?

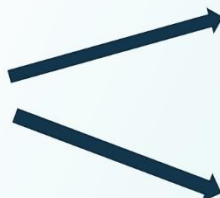
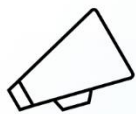
The public health argument is an important strategy to use when advocating for increasing access and removing barriers to treatment, care and services for people living with HIV.

It works like this: When people with HIV have the treatment, care, and services they need stay undetectable, they stay healthy and cannot transmit HIV through sex (Undetectable = Untransmittable, or U=U).

So, treatment, care, and services are good for the *personal health* of people with HIV, and good for the *public health* of the community.

With the federal government’s Ending the HIV Epidemic plan as a primary focus, the public health argument shows how prioritizing the health of people with HIV is essential for reducing new transmissions and ending the epidemic.

Increase access and
remove barriers to
treatment, care,
and diagnostics



Keep PLHIV Healthy
(Personal Health)



Stop new HIV transmissions
(Public Health)



End the HIV
Epidemic

➤ Why is it so important?

The public health argument directly addresses the public health interests of U.S. policymakers.

Although we passionately believe that policymakers should make decisions based on what protects the well-being of people with HIV, we recognize that some policymakers aren't as interested in making our lives better, especially within a system built on maintaining white supremacy and controlling the sexuality of marginalized communities.

We must also explain to policymakers how treatment, care, and services to keep people with HIV healthy *will also address public health goals* to prevent HIV and end the epidemic.

By explaining the public health benefits of your advocacy requests, you will be bringing a stronger argument for your community's needs to the table than if you only spoke about the personal health benefits of treatment, care, and other supportive services.

➤ How do you use it?

You can almost always point to a *public health benefit* of your advocacy talking points because most of your requests will lead to the improved health of people with HIV. When you advocate for the AIDS Watch policies that improve the safety and health of people with HIV, you can say that those requests will support people with HIV to be and stay in quality care and on effective treatment, which also prevents HIV transmissions (U=U). For example, advocating for increased funding for Ryan White, HOPWA, and the Minority AIDS Initiative and amending the Older Americans Act will improve the lives of people with HIV, lead to greater viral suppression, and prevent new transmissions.

Explain U=U:

First, U=U will be new to most U.S. policymakers. If they've heard of it, they might not believe it, or think there is "still a small risk." It's important they know U=U is verified by science and the world's leading public health, medical, and research institutions.



"The medications we take to stay healthy also make it impossible for us to pass on HIV. That's because when people with HIV are on effective treatment, their HIV is suppressed in the body so low that it's undetectable. When it's undetectable, it's not transmittable through sex. In other words, Undetectable = Untransmittable or U=U.

"This is supported by the CDC, NIH, HHS, the WHO, PEPFAR and over 1,000 health organizations worldwide. The message is revolutionary and is having a major positive impact on the lives of people with HIV and on ending the epidemic. In fact, PEPFAR has made U=U education a requirement for funding in over 50 PEPFAR countries."

Use the U=U public health argument in your personal stories to show how your advocacy requests support the goal of ending the epidemic:

"As Dr. Anthony Fauci says, ensuring people with HIV have the treatment and care to reach U=U is the 'foundation of ending the epidemic.'"



That's why we want to talk with you today about [advocacy request]. Our request will not only [state the personal health benefit], it will also prevent new HIV transmissions."

"When people with HIV stay healthy and get to undetectable, they can't pass on HIV. It's a double win if our [advocacy request] is met.

Note: Make this connection as clear as possible. It's often hard to understand how ensuring a person with HIV has what they need to stay healthy will have any impact on ending the epidemic. U=U is radical information that folks in many parts of the world are finding hard to really believe and share with others. It sometimes requires repeated explanation from multiple angles.



“Ensuring people with HIV have what they need (treatment and supportive services) to get to undetectable is the most effective and efficient strategy to save lives and end the epidemic. A recent CDC modelling study showed that if resources were shifted to prioritize, support, and ensure all people with HIV are on treatment and undetectable, new transmissions would be reduced by 94% by 2030.¹ The CDC also has determined that U=U is 100% effective at preventing sexual transmission of HIV.²

➤ What must the U.S. do to inform about U=U?

U=U is new and radical. Radical change takes time, especially in a healthcare system with a long history of patriarchy and paternalism built on a foundation of institutionalized racism, particularly when it involves the sexual activity of highly stigmatized communities associated with HIV. While there are excellent examples of action to share U=U in the U.S., too many healthcare providers and influential organizations are taking little to no action to share or encourage others to share the revolutionary news. Some are still denying U=U or relying on unethical justifications to withhold U=U, provoking caution and anxiety around sharing it. As a result, people with HIV continue to suffer from significant internal and external harms because they and others incorrectly believe they are sexually “infectious.” Furthermore, opportunities to strengthen efforts to end the epidemic are squandered.

In a recent article in *The Lancet*, US leaders call for action to prioritize the inclusion of U=U in efforts to end the HIV epidemic³:

A national culturally competent effort is needed to raise awareness of U=U as a promising approach to reduce HIV stigma, which has a powerful potentiating role in both acquisition risks and treatment challenges.

Advocates should be equipped to use the so-called public health argument from U=U in advocacy to increase access and remove barriers to quality health care; ensuring people with HIV have the treatment and services they need to achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load not only saves lives, but also is an effective way to prevent new transmissions.”

Health-care professionals need to inform patients living with and affected by HIV about U=U to improve, first and foremost, personal health, as well as public health; sharing this information might greatly improve the social and emotional wellbeing of people living with HIV, reduce HIV stigma, reduce anxiety associated with HIV testing, and help motivate treatment uptake, treatment adherence, and engagement in care.

Providers: Advocate for use of the concept of Undetectable equals Untransmittable (U=U) in messaging and support all patients to remain virally suppressed.

We hope that you will use the public health argument in your advocacy at AIDS Watch and beyond and that you will share the U=U message at every opportunity. We invite you to join Prevention Access Campaign (www.preventionaccess.org) and partners to ensure that U=U is widely known, especially by people with HIV, and that people with HIV have access to treatment, care, and services.

Remember: Access to HIV treatment, care and services not only benefits the health of people with HIV, it also prevents transmission to end the epidemic.

¹ <https://www.aidsmap.com/news/dec-2020/us-hiv-infections-could-drop-94-2030-if-treatment-prioritised>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/estimates/preventionstrategies.html>

³ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00390-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00390-1/fulltext)

Thanks for reading! Please feel free to get in touch with us with any questions: Dee Conner (dee@preventionaccess.org), Deondre Moore (deondre@preventionaccess.org), and Cameron Kinker (cameron@preventionaccess.org)

www.preventionaccess.org



Sample Tweets

- At #AIDSWatch, talk w/ policymakers about how #UequalsU helps end the epidemic. U=U helps ppl w/ HIV live long & healthy lives. It dismantles stigma, helping ppl shed shame & fear of transmitting HIV. And w/ an undetectable viral load, ppl w/ HIV don't transmit HIV!
- 400K ppl w/ HIV in the US aren't virally suppressed. #UequalsU is an effective way to reach PLWH who are not in care & encourage treatment adherence. And when PLWH are undetectable, they stay healthy & don't transmit HIV thru sex! #AIDSWatch
- A recent report in @TheLancet stated a "national culturally competent effort is needed to raise awareness of U=U." Tell policymakers at #AIDSWatch that U=U is the foundation of being able to end the epidemic. #UequalsU [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00390-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00390-1/fulltext) [use images 1-4]
- According to a call to action in @TheLancet, advocates "should be equipped to use the so-called public health argument from #UequalsU in advocacy to increase access & remove barriers to health." 400,000 ppl w/ HIV need resources to save their lives & end the epidemic. #AIDSWatch [use image 3]
- Research shows that people w/ HIV who were informed of #UequalsU by their health care providers reported better health outcomes, adherence, & viral suppression. Policy-makers need to know about U=U this #AIDSWatch. <https://sti.bmj.com/content/early/2020/09/16/sextrans-2020-054551> [use image 5]
- A recent model by @CDC_HIVAIDS shows that increasing access to HIV treatment can reduce transmissions by 94% by 2030 if ppl w/ HIV have care & services they need to reach an undetectable viral load. Educate policymakers about #UequalsU @ #AIDSWatch! <https://www.aidsmap.com/news/dec-2020/us-hiv-infections-could-drop-94-2030-if-treatment-prioritised>
- HIV stigma is a public health emergency & #UequalsU is an immediate & effective response! In a recent study, 80% of sexual minority men w/ HIV reported that U=U was beneficial for their self-image. Tell

policymakers about the benefits of U=U @ #AIDSWatch.

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/apc.2020.0137#.X44Phx4IEoM.twitter>

- A recent survey showed only 31% of respondents living w/HIV knew that having an undetectable viral load means the virus cannot be transmitted thru sex. This #AIDSWatch we commit to sharing #UequalsU with policy makers..
- Stigma is a public health emergency. According to www.owninghiv.com, many young PLWH agree someone may avoid sharing their status for fear of losing friends/family or experiencing mental, physical or emotional abuse. #UequalsU fights stigma & stops new transmissions! #AIDSWatch
- We must increase access to HIV treatment. This #AIDSWatch, we commit to using #UequalsU as a rallying cry to get everyone the treatment & care they need & deserve. This is necessary to improve the wellbeing of people w/HIV, prevent new transmissions and end the epidemic!
- In order to end the HIV epidemic, invest in the health of ppl w/HIV. When ppl w/HIV have the treatment & care to stay healthy, this also stops new transmissions. #AIDSWatch is the perfect time to ensure the #UequalsU message reaches policymakers.!
- HIV testing has fallen dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. #UequalsU is shown to encourage testing & fight HIV stigma. Tell everyone this #AIDSWatch! <https://www.aidsmap.com/news/dec-2020/uu-encourages-men-south-africa-test-hiv>

Images 1-4 (The Lancet)

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#ScienceNotStigma

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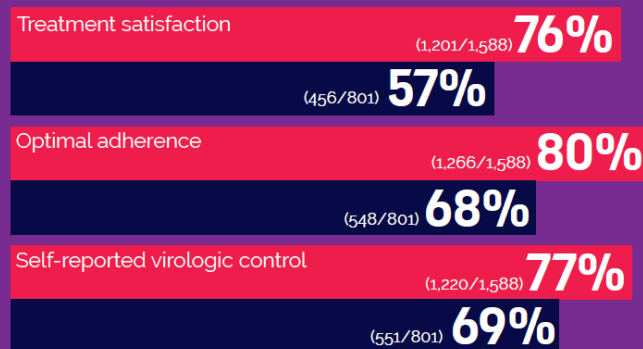
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Image 5 (Positive Perspectives)

INFORMING PLHIV ABOUT U=U

Positive Perspectives 2 data show that people living with HIV who reported they were informed of Undetectable - Untransmittable (U=U) by their HCPs have more favourable health outcomes than those reporting they were not informed by their HCPs (66%, 1,588/2,389)³

Those informed of U=U by their HCPs were **significantly more likely** to report:³



Yet, Positive Perspectives 2 discovered that just over **one-third of PLHIV were not told about U=U** by their HCPs (34%, 801/2,389)³

Informed by HCPs
Not Informed by HCPs