

Section I: Introduction & Overview

“Information = Power”

For people living with HIV and AIDS, no matter where they are in the world, the above phrase has always carried a great deal of significance. Being informed allows us to make choices. Making choices, whether they are for ourselves or for someone we are caring for, provides us with a sense of power over our own health and survival.

In August 2000, the Department of Health published a set of recommendations regarding the medical care of people living with HIV/AIDS. These recommendations – called the HIV/AIDS Policy Guideline: Prevention and Treatment of Opportunistic and HIV-Related Diseases in Adults – are important for people living with HIV/AIDS and their health-care providers. They define the minimum level of care that should be available to all people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has prepared this booklet to help people living with HIV/AIDS understand their medical options, as defined by the HIV/AIDS Policy Guideline, and to combat the common misconception that little can be done to manage HIV and AIDS. TAC hopes that the simplified medical information found in this booklet will enable all people living with HIV/AIDS to become informed about their medical options and to discuss these options with their health-care providers.

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Acquired means that it does not occur naturally in our bodies; it comes from someplace else. Immune Deficiency means that the immune system – the body’s natural defence against germs – weakens and stops functioning properly. Syndrome refers to a group of infections, cancers, and other illnesses that can occur in people with immune deficiency.

AIDS is caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). It can spread from one person to another. Once inside the body, HIV infects and destroys important immune-system cells called CD4+ cells (also known as helper-T-cells or T4 cells). These cells are important because they communicate with other important immune-system cells in the body. If too many CD4+ cells are destroyed, the immune system loses its ability to fight germs that can cause illness. These germs and the illnesses they cause are often referred to as Opportunistic Infections (OI’s). This is because they have the opportunity to grow and cause disease inside the body because the immune system is no longer functioning properly.

People do not get sick from or die of AIDS. Rather, they get sick and die from the OI’s associated with AIDS. Preventing these OI’s, or treating them if they occur, is the most effective way to keep HIV-positive people alive longer and healthier. Much of the information in this booklet discusses these OI’s and what can – and should – be done about them.

Do all HIV-positive people have AIDS?

No. As discussed above, HIV is the cause of AIDS. From the time it first enters the body, it can take HIV ten or more years to cause serious damage to the immune system. On average, people can be infected with the virus for ten or more years before they are diagnosed with AIDS or experience their first OI. Even when the immune system becomes damaged, HIV-positive people can live for several months or years, provided that they take care of themselves and receive medical care.