
What is zidovudine?

Zidovudine is a medication used to treat HIV, originally marketed under the brand name *Retrovir*. Generic versions of zidovudine are now available too. It is taken in combination with other antiretroviral drugs.

The usual dose of zidovudine is 250mg twice a day. You should take the two doses 12 hours apart.

Zidovudine is also available in combination tablets. Several companies make a pill which contains zidovudine and another drug, lamivudine, in one pill. This was originally marketed under the brand name *Combivir*, but generic versions are now available. Zidovudine, lamivudine and abacavir are also available in a combination marketed as *Trizivir*.

How does zidovudine work?

Zidovudine is from a class of drugs known as nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs). Your doctor will prescribe zidovudine as part of your HIV treatment, along with antiretrovirals from another class of drugs. It is important to take all the drugs as prescribed, every day. Each drug class works against HIV in a different way.

The aim of HIV treatment is to reduce the level of HIV in your body (viral load). Ideally, your viral load should become so low that it is undetectable – usually less than 50 copies of virus per ml of blood. Taking HIV treatment and having an undetectable viral load protects your immune system and stops HIV being passed on to someone else during sex.

How do I take zidovudine?

You can take zidovudine with or without food. You should swallow the capsules whole, with some water.

HIV treatment works best if you take it every day. When would be a good time for you to plan to take your treatment? Think about your daily routine and when you will find it easiest to take your treatment.

If you forget to take a dose of zidovudine, take it as soon as you remember. If it is nearly time for your next dose (within two hours), then don't take a double dose, just skip the dose you've forgotten and carry on.

If you regularly forget to take your treatment, or you aren't taking it for another reason, it's important to talk to your doctor about this.

What are the possible side-effects of zidovudine?

All drugs have possible side-effects. It's a good idea to talk to your doctor about possible side-effects before you start taking a drug. If you experience something that might be a side-effect, talk to your doctor about what can be done. A full list of side-effects, including less common side-effects, should be included in the leaflet that comes in the packaging with zidovudine.

We generally divide side-effects into two types:

Common – a side-effect that occurs in at least one in a hundred people (more than 1%) who take this drug.

Rare – a side-effect that occurs in fewer than one in a hundred people (less than 1%) who take this drug.

Common side-effects of zidovudine include (most common in bold):

- **headaches**, feeling dizzy, aching muscles, and generally feeling unwell.
- **feeling sick (nausea)**, being sick (vomiting), diarrhoea, stomach pains.

There are also some common side-effects which your doctor will check for with blood tests. These are: low red blood cell count (anaemia) or low white blood cell count (neutropenia or leucopenia); an increase in the level of liver enzymes; an increased amount in the blood of bilirubin, which may make your skin appear yellow.

Treatment with zidovudine can cause body fat loss (lipoatrophy). If you notice any fat loss from your legs, arms or face, tell your doctor, as your treatment should be changed.

Does zidovudine interact with other drugs?

You should always tell your doctor and pharmacist about any other drugs or medication you are taking. That includes anything prescribed by another doctor, medicines you have bought from a high-street chemist, herbal and alternative treatments, and recreational or party drugs ('chems').

Some medicines or drugs are not safe if taken together – the interaction could cause increased, dangerous levels, or it could stop one or both of the drugs from working. Other drug interactions are less dangerous but still need to be taken seriously. If levels

of one drug are affected, you may need to change the dose you take. This must only be done on the advice of your HIV doctor.

Any drugs that are known to have interactions with zidovudine will be listed in the leaflet that comes in the packaging with zidovudine. Tell your doctor if you are taking any of these drugs, and other drugs that are not on the list.

You should not take zidovudine with any of these drugs:

- ganciclovir injections
- ribavirin
- rifampicin
- stavudine

The following drugs interact with zidovudine. They may make it more likely that you will have side-effects, or you may need some extra monitoring, so make sure you tell your doctor if you are taking any of them:

- aciclovir
- amphotericin
- atovaquone
- clarithromycin
- cotrimoxazole
- dapsone
- doxorubicin
- fluconazole
- flucytosine
- vincristine
- ganciclovir
- interferon
- methadone
- pentamidine
- phenytoin
- probenecid
- pyrimethamine
- sodium valproate
- vinblastine

Can I take zidovudine in pregnancy?

There are other things which are important to your health and HIV care, and which you and your doctor may take into account when making decisions about your treatment. For example, if you are considering having a baby, or want to start taking contraception.

Zidovudine is approved for use during pregnancy. It has been shown to be effective in preventing HIV being passed from mother to baby. Zidovudine can sometimes cause side-effects in unborn babies, so if you are taking zidovudine, your doctor may do some extra tests to monitor your baby's development.

If you are planning to have a baby or think there is the possibility you might get pregnant, talk to your doctor about which drug combination would be best for you.

Talking to your doctor

If you have any concerns about your treatment or other aspects of your health, it's important to talk to your doctor about them.

For example, if you have a symptom or side-effect or if you are having problems taking your treatment every day, it's important that your doctor knows about this. If you are taking any other medication or recreational drugs, or if you have another medical condition, this is also important for your doctor to know about.

Building a relationship with a doctor may take time. You may feel very comfortable talking to your doctor, but some people find it more difficult, particularly when talking about sex, mental health, or symptoms they find embarrassing. It's also easy to forget things you wanted to talk about.

Preparing for an appointment can be very helpful. Take some time to think about what you are going to say. You might find it helpful to talk to someone else first, or to make some notes and bring them to your appointment. Our online tool *Talking points* may help you to prepare for your next appointment – visit www.aidsmap.com/talking-points

For detailed information on this drug, visit the [zidovudine](#) pages in the HIV treatments directory.

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We recommend that this information should always be used in conjunction with professional medical advice.

This factsheet is produced by an organisation called NAM, and has been reviewed by members of our volunteer panels of people living with HIV and medical professionals. We welcome your feedback on our information resources.

NAM provides up-to-date and impartial HIV information. Please visit us at our website where you can read the latest HIV news and sign up for free email updates.

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