VL patient support: General education at different levels
Chifundo

- 28 woman
- On ART for 6 months
- Comes to you for her last adherence follow-up counselling session (Session 4)

- What words would you use to explain viral load to her?
- What should she know about viral load?
Objectives of Viral Load general education:

- To provide basic information about viral load and explain the test procedures

- To promote viral load testing as a monitoring tool and motivate patients to claim for their routine viral load test when they are eligible
**Target group**: all HIV+ patients (prior to ART and after ART initiation)

**When:**
- During the health talks for VL at health facilities
- As part of pre-ART group counselling
- As part of ART initiation follow-up counseling
- At EAC sessions when needed

**How:**
- Mainly in groups facilitated by peer educators, HSAs, counselors
- Using VL key messages together with visual aid
VL education steps

1. Welcome patients, introduce yourself and explain the purpose of activity
2. Use VL key messages and explain first the goal of ARV therapy
3. Inform what VL is and about the importance of VL test
4. Use the VL card #1 and inform about VL test as monitoring tool for patients’ health condition. Explain what undetectable VL means
5. Use the VL card#2 and explain what detectable VL is and how a high VL is usually associated with poor treatment adherence
6. Use the VL test card and encourage patients to get tested (if they haven’t had their test yet) at M6, M24 and every 2 years
7. Explain why VL test is important and what are the advantages of undetectable VL
8. Allow time for questions/answers, thank patients and conclude the session
VL key messages content
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>What is the goal of ARV therapy? (use VL card 1)</th>
<th>You are taking ARVs on a daily basis to fight HIV in your body. Due to ARVs the number of HIV will decrease while your soldiers (CD4 cells) will increase and protect you from diseases</th>
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| 2. | What is viral load and viral load test? (use VL card 1 for undetectable VL and VL card 2 for detectable/high VL) | • Viral load is the amount of HIV in the blood  
• A viral load test measures how much HIV is in the blood  
• The test is done by taking a sample for the lab by a finger prick or by drawing blood  
• High viral load (> 1000 copies/ml) means that there is a lot of HIV in the blood and your treatment is not working well. This is most probably due to an adherence problem  
• Undetectable viral load means that you have so little HIV in your blood that it can hardly be detected. It means your treatment is working well for you, because the ARVs are fighting HIV and thus reducing the amount of HIV in your blood. It does not mean you no longer have HIV but that it is too low to be measured  
• The aim of your treatment is to reach and maintain an undetectable viral load |
VL card
#1
VL card
#2
| 3. When to have a viral load test? (Use VL card for testing) | • All those on ARV treatment will be offered a viral load test as part of the routine follow up at M6, M24 and every 2 years afterwards. Depending on your health condition, the health worker may request you to have additional VL tests  
• Your health worker will tell you when to come for the next viral load test, according to your last test results  
• It is important not to miss your next appointment date for viral load test and to come for the results on time  
• If you are already on ART more than 6 months or 2 years and have not been tested yet, remind your health worker to collect the sample and ask for your result. It is your right to know your viral load and know if you are doing well on treatment |

| 4. Importance of viral load test (use VL card for testing) | • It determines if you have high or low number of HIV in your blood  
• It helps the health worker to know if ARVs are working well and to detect if there is adherence to ARV treatment or if there is a need to be support you in adherence so that your treatment will work well |
HIGH VL
- High risk of resistance to ARV. Possible treatment failure
- Think about how you take ARV and improve adherence
- Repeat VL test after 3 months

LOW/UNDetectABLE VL
- Your virus is controlled
- Continue ARV with good adherence
- Repeat VL test at M24, M48 and every 2 years

USE VIRAL LOAD as a chance to commit yourself again to taking ARV as prescribed and to improve your health

DOES ANY OF THESE APPLY TO YOU?
- Forgetting ARV doses
- Stopping and starting ARVs
- You have no support and encouragement from others
- Feeling tired of treatment
- Missing refills and appointments at health facilities
<table>
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<th>Advantages of undetectable/very low viral load</th>
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| 5 | ● Immune system stays strong and you have lower risk of becoming ill from opportunistic infections  
   ● Pregnant women reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to their babies |   |
| 6 | Motivation to ART adherence |   |
|   | ● Adhere to ARV treatment in order to maintain undetectable viral load, a strong immune system and a long life  
   ● Lack of adherence will lead to a higher viral load, increased risk of HIV resistance to ARVs, and higher chances of opportunistic infections due to a weak immune system |   |
Practice in groups:
- Group 1: Key messages for health talk
- Group 2: Role-play Session 4

One participant as facilitator, one as observer, rest as patients