

British HIV Association (BHIVA) guidance for virtual consultations for people living with HIV: non-technical summary

Virtual consultations for HIV care

The British HIV Association (BHIVA) produces medical guidelines about HIV treatment and care. Each guideline reviews the evidence for the best care. There are detailed guidelines for HIV treatment, and how you should be monitored to ensure that the treatment is effective. There are other guidelines on many aspects of living with HIV. All the BHIVA guidelines can be found at: <https://www.bhiva.org/guidelines>. These guidelines are for clinicians providing HIV care, but it is important that you know what is in them, and what they might mean for you when you are accessing services for your HIV care.

In addition, BHIVA produces rapid guidance. This can be in response to fast-moving events, and where some changes to HIV treatment or care may be needed. HIV treatment and care may need to be different during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This non-technical summary is about the changes in use of virtual consultations that have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and may continue for some time. It aims to summarise the main points in the rapid guidance, and what it might mean for your HIV treatment and care. You can check the full guidance for more detail at: <https://www.bhiva.org/guidance-for-virtual-consultations-for-people-with-HIV>.

Key messages:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, more consultations, including those with HIV specialists, are taking place virtually. This means by phone, video or email.
- Virtual consultations may not be possible or practical for some people living with HIV; for example, if you do not have a phone or internet access, or you cannot have confidential discussions privately and safely.
- You should be given a choice between face-to-face or virtual consultations. But there are times when either a face-to-face meeting is necessary or a virtual consultation is the only option.
- A face-to-face meeting may be needed in order to provide the best HIV care, for example if you have just been diagnosed with HIV or are transferring your care to another HIV clinic.
- The time between viral load tests may need to be changed. This will depend on your individual situation. Your healthcare team will advise on this.
- If you are using contraception, ways to make sure this is not interrupted will be discussed with you. This may involve your GP.

Introduction

There is a long-term plan for the NHS to make more use of digital technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we receive medical care. There are fewer face-to-face consultations with GPs and other healthcare professionals, and more virtual consultations. Virtual consultations are all those that are not face-to-face, including consultations by phone or video and email discussions. This change happened very quickly in all areas of healthcare, and mainly without the involvement of patients.

The rapid guidance is about the way virtual consultations should be carried out for people living with HIV.

Rapid guidance has not gone through the usual rigorous BHIVA guidelines development process and has not been open to public consultation. You can leave feedback on rapid guidance here:

<https://www.bhiva.org/rapid-guidance>.

Your choice

Where possible, you (the person living with HIV) should be able to choose the type of consultation that you prefer. But there may be situations in which public health restrictions mean that a face-to-face consultation is not possible, or the healthcare team may need to see you in-person to provide the best care.

If you choose to have a virtual consultation, you should still be offered the chance to have a face-to-face meeting at least once a year. You may also be offered a face-to-face meeting if you feel unwell and think you need to be seen in-person. A yearly face-to-face visit would also allow you to have vaccinations, sexual health screening or physical examinations if needed.

Ease of access to virtual consultations

You will need a phone or to be able to access the internet for a virtual consultation. The most common form of virtual consultation during the COVID-19 pandemic has been by phone. For video consultations, you will need to be comfortable with using applications such as Zoom, Teams or NHS Attend Anywhere, or video messaging. You may also want to have a secure and private space for confidential discussions. You should let your healthcare team know if you think that virtual consultations are not practical for you.

Privacy and confidentiality

It is important that your discussions with your healthcare team are confidential. So at the start of any virtual consultation, either via the internet or by phone, the healthcare team will need to check that you are the right person that they should be talking to, even if you are familiar to each other. They should also make sure that it is a convenient time for you to talk, and that you can talk freely and safely. They should tell you how they will get in touch with you if the call is disconnected for any reason.

HIV treatment and care

There may be situations where a face-to-face consultation is needed or preferred. These include:

- If you have just been diagnosed with HIV
- If you are transferring your care to another HIV clinic
- If your CD4 count is low
- If you are pregnant
- If other health checks are needed
- When you are switching your antiretroviral medication
- If you need an interpreter

Monitoring your viral load (the amount of virus in your blood) is important. The aim of treatment is to keep the viral load at very low levels. When this level falls below a certain value it is so low that it is called undetectable. This is not only best for your own health, but it also means that you cannot pass on HIV through sex. This is known as 'undetectable is untransmittable', or 'U=U'. Your healthcare team will review your situation, while considering any COVID-19 restrictions, and may suggest a longer interval between viral load tests on a case-by-case basis.

During normal face-to-face consultations, a number of other health checks can be carried out, such as physical measurements (for example weight and blood pressure) or simple tests (for example a urine dipstick test). These are not possible during a virtual consultation. Your healthcare team will review your situation and may suggest that, in some cases, a face-to-face consultation is needed in order to carry out some of these additional health checks.

If you are using contraception, it is important that this is not interrupted. Your healthcare team will discuss the best way of managing this with you. This may need to involve your GP, if you have one.

Further information and support

Community organisations in the UK that produce information and resources about HIV treatment include HIV i-Base (<https://www.i-base.info>), Terrence Higgins Trust (<https://www.tht.org.uk>) and NAM (<https://www.aidsmap.com>).

About BHIVA

The British HIV Association (BHIVA) is an organisation for health professionals in the UK. Members include doctors, nurses, researchers, pharmacists and community advocates. Since 1995, BHIVA has been committed to providing excellent care for people living with and affected by HIV. BHIVA is a national advisory body on all aspects of HIV care and provides a national platform for HIV care issues. To help promote and monitor high standards of care, BHIVA publishes a range of clinical guidelines: <https://www.bhiva.org/guidelines.aspx>.

Information about how BHIVA guidelines are developed can be found at: <https://www.bhiva.org/clinicalguidelines.aspx>.