CD4 Counts (T4 Counts)

The most common test your doctor will use to follow your HIV infection is the CD4 Count. Other names for this blood test are CD4 lymphocyte count, T4 helper count and T4 count.

About CD4 Cells

Your immune system is the part of your body that protects you from infections. The CD4 cell is a special white blood cell that is part of your immune system. HIV weakens your immune system by infecting these cells. A person with a normal immune system usually has a CD4 count of 1000 or higher.

How HIV Affects Your CD4 Cell Count

When a person becomes infected with HIV, the CD4 cells may remain normal for several years. An infected person usually does not have any symptoms of HIV when the CD4 count is normal. But HIV is a retrovirus which means that the virus infects CD4 cells. As HIV spreads, it weakens more CD4 cells and your healthy CD4 count gets smaller.
When the CD4 Cell Count Drops

As your CD4 cells drop, you may begin to develop more signs of infection. The lower your CD4 counts are, the more difficult it is for your immune system to fight off germs. HIV makes your body immune deficient. This disease is known as the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome or AIDS.

- When your CD4 cells drop to below 500, your doctor may start you on antiretroviral medicines (ARVs). These medicines slow the progress of the disease, but will not completely stop the CD4 cells from being destroyed.
- When the CD4 cell count drops below 200, you are more at risk for developing opportunistic infections. Opportunistic infections (OIs) are illnesses caused by germs that are not harmful to people with a healthy immune system. Some of these infections are prevented by taking medicine.

Checking Your CD4 Cell Count

- It is important to be aware of your CD4 counts. If you have HIV, have your CD4 cells checked every 6 months or more often if on medicine for HIV.
- Your CD4 count can vary up to 30% from day to day. There are differences in labs so it is important to have the CD4 count done at the same lab every time.
- A slow steady decrease of your CD4 counts is of concern and a rapid decrease is more serious.
- Do not get depressed about your CD4 cell count. Your CD4 count is a way to determine how HIV is affecting your immune system. Many people are living long, productive lives even though their CD4 counts are very low.
To Keep Your CD4 Cell Counts Healthy

You can do some things to improve your overall health:

• Take all medicines prescribed by your doctor. Do not stop taking medicines unless you are told to do so. Do not skip a dose of medicine.

• Have a viral load test taken regularly. This will tell you how much HIV is in your blood. The less HIV, the more healthy CD4 cells you will have. Medicines are used to keep viral load low.

• Wash your hands with soap and water often to prevent germs from others from making your body sick. When possible, avoid crowds and people who are ill. Make sure hands are clean when touching your eyes, nose or mouth where germs can enter your body easier.

• Get plenty of sleep.

• Eat nutritious foods each day.

• Exercise regularly.

• Reduce stress in your life.

• Avoid drugs and alcohol.

These steps will not prevent the progression of HIV but are good habits for you to keep your body healthy and to feel your best.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu