Women(’s) Count(s)

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Results from long-term studies of women with HIV have been hitting the news, and some of the news is good. Those who start HAART amid advanced-stage HIV, or AIDS, can still snag good results, says the Women’s Interagency HIV Study (WIHS). The March report may encourage those who still think that folks launching HAART with CD4 counts below 200 won’t benefit.

The six-year study of 1,132 women HIVers focused on HAART virgins with CD4s below 200 and viral loads over 10,000. Almost half had previously suffered at least one opportunistic infection.

“The results were greater than we expected,” says principal investigator Kathryn Anastos, MD, of Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, New York. Eighty percent of the women pumped up their CD4s to 200 or more; within five years, 55 percent had surpassed 350. The upshot: In long-term treatment it’s the on-HAART, not pre-HAART, figure that counts.

Twenty percent of the women didn’t respond well to therapy—their CD4s stayed below 200. The reason remains a mystery, but the researchers point to poor adherence, drug resistance, active drug use and depression as common factors.

But the main theme is encouraging: “As long as the CD4 comes up above 200,” Anastos says, “the woman is protected, no matter where she started. It’s never too late to begin HAART.” She adds that the message applies to men as well.

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