

Dear Thandiwe

Yes, antiretrovirals (ARVs for short) can help people with AIDS. They do not get rid of HIV but they stop it from growing, allowing your immune system (which fights infections) to become strong again. And yes, they are expensive. But the price is slowly coming down as they are now produced in Zimbabwe.

However, ARVs are powerful and complicated, and people usually only start using them when they are quite sick. You must NEVER take them without medical advice and testing. Also, you need to be sure that you can afford to stay on them for the rest of your life because it's dangerous to start them, then stop and then start again.

Remember, too, that ARVs are not the only way to stay healthy. You can fight HIV by eating the right foods, taking vitamins and living positively. This includes treating any illnesses (called opportunistic infections) immediately.

ARVs make you feel better but HIV is still in your blood so you can still infect another person or reinfect yourself. Remember, always use a condom when having sex, or practise safer sex.

Whether you use ARVs or not, try to live a healthy life and you will have many more years to look after your daughter. Good luck!

Auntie Stella

ACTION POINTS

- **EITHER:**

Visit a clinic and other places helping people with HIV and AIDS to find out more about drugs and treatments.

OR:

Invite a knowledgeable person to come and talk to you about these drugs.

Find out as much as you can about ARVs. Are they available to anyone? Are they free or what do they cost? Also find out what is good and what is difficult about taking the drugs.

- What support do people using ARVs need? From whom? (Think about the role of family and friends and also what care they need from clinics and other community institutions.)
- If ARVs can save lives, why do you think they are so difficult to get? In South Africa, ordinary people have been working together to convince the government to provide ARVs for everyone who needs them. What community health groups are there in your country working towards making the drugs cheaper and more available? What exactly are they doing? What role can young people play in these groups?
- See Card 26 for information on how to live a healthy and positive life when you have HIV or AIDS.