

“I feel empowered”: Women’s perspectives on and experiences with long-acting injectable anti-retroviral therapy in the United States and Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Given barriers associated with oral ART adherence and considerations of patients’ preferences, long-acting injectable (LA) ART (Cabotegravir + Rilpivirine) is under development and has been shown to be non-inferior to daily oral ART in Phase 3 trials. While most LA ART trial participants to date have been male, approximately one third of Phase III participants are female offering an important opportunity to understand how LA ART is perceived by women before it becomes part of routine clinical care.

Methods: We conducted in-depth interviews with 80 people living with HIV (PLHIV) participating in Phase 2 and Phase 3 clinical trials of LA ART in the United States and Spain (LATTE-2, ATLAS, ATLAS 2-M and FLAIR). Fifteen percent (12/80) of trial participants interviewed were women. Interviews exploring patient perspectives on and experiences with LA ART were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using thematic content analysis. Transcripts from women’s interviews were then recoded for gender-specific emergent themes and diversity and consensus in perceptions and experiences related to LA ART were explored by gender.

Results: Women shared many of the positive perceptions of LA ART expressed by men but also had their own unique perspectives. Salient themes specific to the interviews among women included perceptions that LA ART: 1) addresses the challenge of remembering pills amidst women’s busy day-to-day realities which often involved multiple roles and responsibilities such as working full-time and taking care of children and families; 2) is a less time-consuming way to manage HIV compared to oral regimens; 3) creates less stress and pressure than oral ART; and 4) is emotionally freeing and empowering.

Conclusions: Similar to male participants, female patients had generally positive views of LA ART. However, the gendered nature of their daily lives also led to unique perspectives on why and how they were satisfied with and interested in using LA ART. These findings should be considered in future research focused on women’s adherence and LA ART as well as inform specific interventions and support systems to help women succeed with future LA ART use.

BACKGROUND

- Adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) to treat HIV remains a critical global health challenge across settings, particularly among women.
- LA ART offers significant promise for addressing some of the key barriers to daily oral ART adherence among people living with HIV (PLHIV).
- Little is known about women’s experiences on LA ART. Given that this new treatment modality may soon become an option within the context of routine clinical care, it is essential to understand women’s perspectives.

METHODS

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted in the U.S. and Spain
- 80 male and female PLHIV participating in clinical trials of LA ART, participants were receiving LA ART either monthly or every other month
- Data were coded in the qualitative software Atlas.ti[®] for *a priori* and emergent domains of interest using an iterative thematic content analysis approach
- All transcripts of women’s interviews were re-coded to identify emergent themes with broader focus on gendered dynamics: motherhood, relationship status, role in nuclear and extended family, work life, and other responsibilities
- Emergent codes were compared with relevant codes from men’s interviews

PARTICIPANTS

- Female participants ranged from 28-59 years of age with a mean age of 41
- More than half of women were mothers (58%); 5 had more than 1 child, two were single mothers (1 divorced, 1 widowed) and 2 were also grandmothers
- Women participants had multiple caretaking roles including caring for children, grandchildren, aging parents, and chronically ill partners

RESULTS

“Life is busy”: LA ART addresses challenge of remembering pills

- Both men and women reported being busy with work and other activities and the challenge of remembering their pills in the context of a busy daily life.
- However, women talked more frequently about juggling multiple demands between work, children and other care-taking responsibilities. LA ART was described as lightening the load of what women managed on a daily basis.

I remember having to call in the beginning several times here at the clinic going, "I think I took it [my pill]. But I'm not sure. Do I take it again?" You know, because life is busy, kids running around, just forgetting things, so it was a different experience.
(Female ATLAS participant, U.S., age 30)



“For time more than anything”: LA ART as a time-saver

- Oral ART was described as time-consuming with participants citing time spent going to the clinic, waiting for prescriptions, and remembering to take pills each day.
- LA ART was perceived as requiring only the time needed for the injection appointment each month or every two months, women felt that they could forget about managing their disease until their next appointment.

The comfort that instead of you taking a pill every day at night... it is once every eight weeks, to come and get your injection, the discomfort is, let's say, I lose a few hours but I face that for eight weeks, I don't take a pill at night.
(Female ATLAS-2M participant, Spain, age 29)



- However, for some, coming to clinic for the injection appointments was still seen as a burden that took time and energy, and often competed with work and childcare responsibilities.

The fact of coming once a month, for me is still binding you to a hospital that has to give you the injections. It is an advance, I like it, but for me it's still being tied.
(Female FLAIR participant, Spain, age 31)

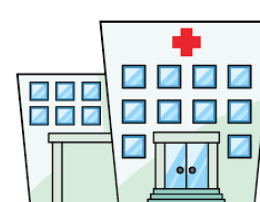


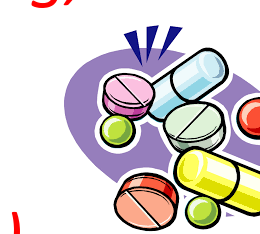
Table 1. Characteristics of study participants (n= 80)

	Female (n=12)	Male (n=68)
Country	Spain 67% (8/12)	60% (41/68)
	US 33% (4/12)	40% (27/68)
Age (mean, range)	41 (28-59)	39 (20-76)
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian 58% (7/12)	76% (52/68)
	Latino/a 17% (2/12)	13% (8/58)
	African American 8% (1/12)	4% (3/68)
	Asian 8% (1/12)	4% (3/68)
	Mixed race 8% (1/12)	3% (2/58)
Trial	LATTE-2 16% (2/12)	37% (25/68)
	ATLAS/ATLAS-2M 67% (8/12)	48% (33/68)
	FLAIR 16% (2/12)	15% (10/68)

“Less stress and anxiety” with LA compared to oral ART

- Women described LA ART as generating “less stress and anxiety”, referring to the stress of remembering HIV medications and wondering if they had taken it or not, which was more stressful with daily oral ART.

When I was taking Truvada and the pills once a day, I'd still get anxiety over whether I'd taken it or not, and once or twice I double-dosed, just because I couldn't remember, but then I'd go count and-- it's just a lot of anxiety, and I'm not an anxious person, but to have to remember something every day is a little strange to me...only having to have something done once a month or once every other month is just awesome, because if I'm on vacation, I don't have to worry about the time switching, and if I'm out doing an activity or I'm camping or I'm hiking, I don't have to remember at a certain time to stop whatever I'm doing.
(Female ATLAS-2M participant, U.S., age 35)



RESULTS

“I feel empowered”: LA ART as freedom and control

- While both men and women described freedom from the logistics of pill taking, women talked about freedom in terms of what LA ART meant for their emotional state and their sense of perceived control over their day.
- Across interviews in both countries, women used the words “freeing”, “freedom”, “empowered”, “liberación” (freedom), “de tener la cabeza libre” (having a free mind).
- Women’s descriptions of freedom were situated within the broader social context of their daily lives which were often filled with multiple roles and responsibilities related to work and caring for multiple family members.

Just to know that I wasn't going to have to take a pill every day, it just meant freedom for me. It feels like come in, get it done. I'm out the door and just got to maintain my health and that's it. Gives me a lot of flexibility. Makes me feel more empowered because I don't have to be taking the pills with me anywhere, I don't have to remember to take a pill. It's very empowering knowing that it's in my body helping fight everything from the inside.
(Female ATLAS participant, U.S., age 30)



CONCLUSIONS

- Similar to male participants, female participants had generally positive views of LA ART. However, the gendered nature of women’s lives, including their unique roles and responsibilities, shaped why and how they were satisfied.
- Findings highlight the need to consider gender-related differences in patient preferences for LA ART, which should be further examined and taken into account to ensure equitable uptake and adherence to LA ART among women.
- Results from this analysis also underscore the importance of interventions and support systems to facilitate women’s use of LA ART, once available, given the adherence issues that women have faced with daily oral ART to date.

CONTACT

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