

Can a WebApp improve how young people take their HIV medication?

Primary findings for ATN 138: YouThrive

Connecting Youth and Young Adults to Optimize ART Adherence Through the Interactive YouThrive WebApp



Youth living with HIV (YLWH) face a number of challenges to reaching an undetectable viral load.

These include access to youth-centered HIV healthcare, insurance costs, and transportation to and from clinic appointments. Mental health challenges such as HIV stigma can also negatively impact how people navigate taking HIV medications every day.

Although there are programs to encourage people to take their HIV medications as prescribed, most are tailored for adults and have shown limited impact. However, considering that the majority of US-based youth have access to mobile phones, laptops, and other devices, there is an increasing recognition that these technologies can be used to encourage HIV medication adherence among YLWH.

YouThrive explored ways to provide virtual support networks that bypass geographic limitations.

With the increasing use of social media as an important way of connecting among youth, digital interventions that leverage support networks for YLWH may be an important avenue to address HIV care needs. They can also help meet the high demands of social development in early adulthood.

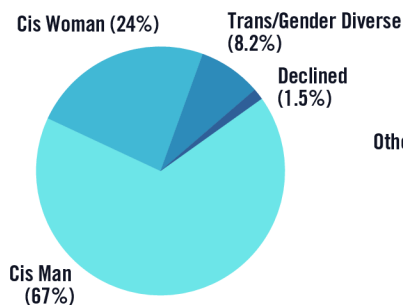
Based on *Thrive With Me (TWM)*, a tailored webapp developed by the same study team focused on improving ART adherence among adults, the **YouThrive study sought to adapt TWM for YLWH to assess if participants using YouThrive would:**

1. Achieve sustained viral suppression, and
2. Be more beneficial for YLWH who use substances.

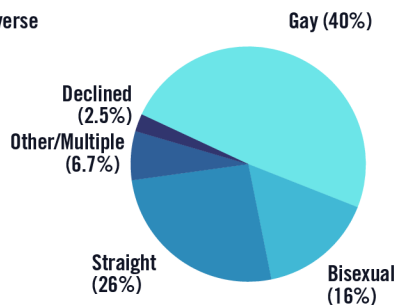
Who participated in YouThrive?

Between August 2019 and December 2021, 208 participants, ages 15 to 24, enrolled in the YouThrive study across 8 ATN sites in the U.S. Individuals were recruited through clinic referrals and ads on social media platforms, like Instagram and dating apps.

Gender Identity



Sexual Identity



Two in three participants were between 21 to 24 years old.

Other demographics at the start of the study include:

- About two-thirds of participants identify as Black, with White as the next most common racial identity (16%).
- Just over half (54%) of participants were enrolled in school.
- About 1 in 4 (23%) participants were experiencing housing instability when entering the study.
- About 2 in 3 participants were single and not in relationships.

Developing the YouThrive Webapp

After conducting 6 focus groups for suggestions on how to adapt the original intervention for YLWH, the study team worked with a technology partner to design, test, and finalize the YouThrive webapp. The app would be designed as a safe space for YLWH to share information and feel empowered to make healthy choices.

The final version of the YouThrive webapp offered a variety of tools including:

- Peer interactions,
- Daily content on living with HIV,
- Personal HIV medication adherence tracking, and
- Goal setting.

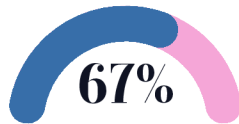
YouThrive Study Experience

After enrollment, participants were randomly assigned to receive either the YouThrive webapp or a weekly email newsletter that contained information about relevant topics (e.g. mental health) but no information about adhering to HIV medications. The intervention lasted for 5 months, after which participants completed a survey and over half (58%) had their viral load measured.

Most participants trusted information on YouThrive, rating it as helpful, but felt like it could be improved.



trusted the information
in YouThrive




would recommend
YouThrive to a friend

“It allowed me to visually realize and set accountability not so much a reminder but a clear understanding of changes I need to make to be healthier.”

“It was a very useful tool at first but not so much after awhile. It's missing some flow. [...] It would help if I received a daily notification at a specific time.”

Examples of YouThrive Features




Message Posting

Participants could directly and voluntarily post and respond on a single, shared feed. Similar to how it might feel to interact in an in-person, peer support group.



Monitoring Tools

YouThrive had multiple features to help users track their medication dosing, mood, and personal goals with helpful reminders and regular feedback.



Educational Content

Users received daily tips, videos, or image-based content, like memes, to provide strategies and support related to HIV, healthy sexuality, and other topics important for YLWH.

What did researchers learn?

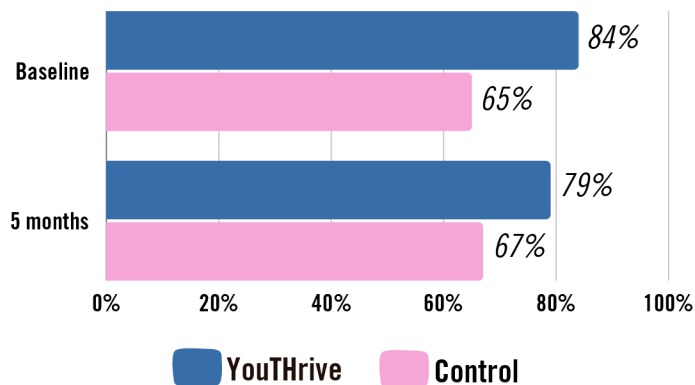
Among participants who received the YouThrive webapp or newsletter control condition, researchers found that:

- 1 Most participants had an undetectable viral load (<50 copies) at the start of the study.** After 5 months, viral loads were still similar with no significant change between both groups.
- 2 In fact, nearly 2 in 3 participants entered and remained virally suppressed throughout the study.** Only about 11 participants went from an unsuppressed to a suppressed status, with the majority being from the control group.
- 3 The newsletter control condition might have had a stronger effect than expected** when it came to how YLWH manage their medication. With many youth feeling overburdened by COVID-19, they might have paid more attention to the newsletter.

Overall, there was no evidence that YouThrive improved ART adherence or viral suppression among youth in this study, including those who used substances.

However, there are several factors that could have affected YouThrive's impact or relevance among the group. For instance, the study had a relatively small sample size, with a large percentage of youth starting already virally suppressed. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major interruption of this study, which could have impacted the results.

Proportion of Participants with an Undetectable Viral load after 5 months (n= 120)



Key Takeaways

YouThrive does not appear to increase how often YLWH take their HIV medication. Considering the limitations, the webapp cannot be definitely recommended as an intervention to support HIV medication adherence among YLWH. However, future research might consider combining webapps like YouThrive with more intensive interventions.

To read more about YouThrive and other studies, you can visit atnconnect.org or follow us @atnresearch.

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It makes me really happy that there's stuff out there for people like me

Sometimes I feel lonely... it was cool to remember it's not just me. I wish other people used it more.