

254 of 1000 DOCUMENTS

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## Johnson: Faith is helping him beat the effects of the AIDS virus

**BYLINE:** DARA AKIKO TOM

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Magic Johnson says his faith in God and the prayers of friends and family have helped his body push back the AIDS virus to undetectable levels.

"If it wasn't for the Lord's blessing, I wouldn't be as healthy as I am now," Johnson told KCBS-TV in an interview broadcast Friday.

Earlier on Friday, his doctors credited powerful drugs with reducing the virus in the former Los Angeles Lakers star's body \_ but they added that he is not cured.

"Earvin is doing very well," Dr. David Ho and Dr. Michael Mellman, physicians for Johnson, said in a joint statement.

"However, we must emphasize that 'undetectable' doesn't equal 'absent.' It would be premature and incorrect to say Earvin is 'virus free.' We are very pleased he has adhered to his daily drug regimen, and that is reflected in his good health."

"His viral activity is infinitesimal," Johnson agent Lon Rosen said. But he acknowledged that did not mean the virus was gone.

Johnson's comments were in response to comments by his wife, Cookie Johnson, to a magazine that she believes low viral activity in Johnson's bloodstream means he has been healed by God.

"This is the first time we've ever said anything about the viral activity within my own system," he said.

"... So when she came out and said, because there's no viral activity within my body, she feels, and we both believe, that we've been healed, by our faith in God and by his blessing," Johnson said during a break in a practice with his touring basketball team.

Johnson, who played for the Lakers from 1979 to 1992, disclosed in November 1991 that he was HIV-positive. He coached the team for the final 16 games of the 1993-94 season and came out of retirement to play the second half of last season before retiring for good. He now owns a small portion of the Lakers.

At 37, Johnson maintains a strenuous exercise program and plays basketball with the Magic Johnson All-Stars, a touring team that competes in exhibition games, mostly in Europe.

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Just as Johnson's announcement that he was HIV-positive catapulted the issue of AIDS into mainstream social discussions, activists hope that his progress encourages people to get tested and take advantage of improved treatments.

Thousands of HIV patients also have seen their infections recede to undetectable levels after taking drugs called protease inhibitors, approved last year by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"I speak on behalf of David Ho when I say one of the drugs in the combination (used by Johnson) is a protease inhibitor," Ho's brother and spokesman, Sidney Ho, confirmed Friday.

"My concern is that people are going to think that Magic Johnson is the only person this is happening to ... that he's cured ... that there's a cure for AIDS, therefore, I don't have to worry about being infected," Lee Klosinski, director of education at AIDS Project Los Angeles, said.

A patient with undetectable virus levels can still infect others and even if the virus is undetected in blood or semen, it can be present in other areas such as the intestines.

Protease inhibitors reduce illnesses in infected patients. The drugs are taken with at least two other AIDS drugs on a strict schedule. The regimen sometimes requires meticulous timing some drugs must be taken an hour before eating or two hours after. Side effects include nausea, vomiting, headaches, backaches and gastrointestinal problems.

As many as 40 percent of patients who take the potent "cocktail" of drugs eventually develop a resistance, either because the virus becomes resistant after years on other AIDS drugs, or because patients don't or are unable to take the drugs as ordered. The drugs are expensive, costing between dlrs 12,000 and dlrs 15,000 a year.

Nearly 90 percent of the people who take the powerful drugs within a few months of being diagnosed HIV-positive have undetectable levels similar to Johnson, said Dr. Jeffrey Laurence, a lead AIDS researcher at Cornell Medical Center and scientific consultant to the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

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