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## Magic says his health a blessing from God; doctors credit drugs

**BYLINE:** By DARA AKIKO TOM, Associated Press Writer

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Magic Johnson, the affable basketball superstar whose disclosure that he was HIV-positive helped catapult AIDS awareness into the social mainstream, has another reason to flash his trademark grin.

The virus in Johnson's body has been reduced 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 on Friday.

Doctors credited Johnson's drug treatments, but added that the the former Los Angeles Laker has not been cured.

"Earvin is doing very well," said his doctors, Dr. David Ho and Dr. Michael Mellman. "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," the doctors said.

Johnson, 37, has been taking protease inhibitors, which reduce illnesses and lengthen life in some patients.

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's condition, said Dr. Jeffrey Laurence, an AIDS researcher at Cornell Medical Center and a consultant to the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

"People are living longer, but we're measuring it in months," Laurence said. "The number - 'tell me how many years I'm going to get out of these drugs' - we're not going to get."

As many as 40 percent of patients who take the potent drugs develop a resistance to them, either because the virus itself becomes resistant to the drugs or because patients don't take the drugs as ordered.

The drugs, which are taken with at least two other AIDS drugs on a strict schedule, have side effects that include nausea, vomiting, headaches, backaches and gastrointestinal problems.

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

"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," said Lee Klosinski, director of education at AIDS Project Los Angeles.

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Johnson, who played for the Lakers from 1979 to 1992, disclosed in November 1991 that he had the AIDS virus. He briefly coached and played for the Lakers again before retiring for good last season. He remains active.

The basketball star's wife insists it was God who intervened.

"The Lord has definitely healed Earvin," Cookie Johnson told Ebony magazine in an interview published this month. Doctors "think it's the medicine. We claim it in the name of Jesus."

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