

Taking care of yourself when living with HIV

Looking-after-yourself.jpg



FAST FACTS

- Starting antiretroviral treatment early, and sustaining it as part of your everyday routine, is the best way of ensuring that your immune system stays strong.
- Healthy eating, regular exercise and getting enough rest are all good ways to maintain your health.
- Your mental wellbeing is just as important as your physical health. Talking about your concerns with family, friends or a support group can really help.

Having [HIV](#) doesn't have to stop you living a full and healthy life. With the right [treatment](#) and care, you can expect to live just as long as someone who doesn't have HIV.¹

There's a lot you can do to take care of yourself and feel fitter, healthier and happier.

If you have any questions, talk to your healthcare professional about nutrition, exercise, mental health or any of the other issues covered here.

Taking HIV treatment

Current treatment for HIV is [not a cure](#) for the virus, but it can keep HIV under control and this keeps your immune system strong.

In the past, older HIV drugs had serious side-effects, but treatment with modern HIV drugs is much better. If a side-effect doesn't go away and is affecting your quality of life, you should be able to [change to a different drug](#). Once you [start HIV treatment](#), taking it every day is important to keep yourself well.² Talk to your healthcare professional if you are having any problems taking

treatment.

Eating healthily

People living with HIV should aim to eat a balanced diet, without too much fat, sugar or salt. For many people, eating well is a pleasure, and learning how to cook and prepare food for yourself, your family, or friends can be fun.

If you are underweight – perhaps because HIV was already making you ill by the time you were diagnosed – or overweight, or if you have any particular dietary problems or side-effects that make it hard to eat well, then you might benefit from talking to a healthcare professional about your diet.

To make it easier to understand what a balanced diet is made up of, it can help to think about the type of foods you eat.³ Your diet should be made up of:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables to provide fibre, vitamins and minerals
- plenty of starchy carbohydrates to give you energy – such as brown rice, potatoes, wholemeal pasta and bread
- some protein such as lean meat, fish, eggs and beans
- some dairy products, such as milk, yoghurt and cheese
- small amounts of fats and sugars



Exercise and keeping fit

Being active is good for you in lots of ways – it can help to build your muscles, keep your bones strong, burn fat and keep your heart healthy. Some people who are [living with HIV](#) experience a loss of muscle mass and strength, so exercise can help prevent this.⁴

You might get your exercise by taking part in a sport, or going to the gym, but everyday activities like dancing, playing in the park with your children, walking to work and gardening can all help get you moving.

If you want to do more exercise, feel fitter, have more stamina, more flexibility, or lose weight, there are three types of exercise to think about. These include:

- Cardio or aerobic exercise – this increases your heart rate to help blood flow right around your

- body, delivering oxygen to your muscles and keeping your heart and lungs healthy. Try running, swimming, dancing or cycling⁵
- Resistance training - this increases the strength of your muscles by lifting weights for a period of time and then repeating. Even lifting a tin of beans will do!
 - Flexibility training - this stretches different parts of your body to strengthen your muscles and joints. Try stretching before and after any exercise you do, or focus on flexibility with an activity like yoga.

Particularly [as we get older](#), regular exercise is important in reducing the risk of heart disease and diabetes, which can be more common in people living with HIV. Exercise is also great at reducing feelings of stress and symptoms of depression.⁶

Staying happy and fulfilling your potential

Taking care of yourself is not just about your physical health, but looking after your mental and emotional health too.

[Finding out you have HIV](#) can be a shock, and it may take you some time to adjust. Support from your friends and family, or other people living with HIV, can really help when you are finding things difficult.

Once you begin coming to terms with HIV, it's a good idea to think about the rest of your life. What are your goals? What's important to you? Maybe you want to study, have a family, travel or change career - HIV shouldn't stop you doing any of these things!

What else can I do to take care of myself?

Many of the things we do to look after ourselves are common sense. Try to get plenty of rest and sleep. If you smoke, try to stop - it isn't always easy, but there is support available to help you. If you are concerned about your [alcohol or drug use](#), talk to a healthcare professional for advice and support.

It's also important to think about any [other health conditions](#) you have; particularly as we get older, we're more likely to experience other health problems.

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- 2. WHO (2015) 'Guideline on when to start antiretroviral therapy and on pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV'
- 3. NHS Choices (2013) 'The Eatwell Plate'
- 4. Aidsmap (2011) 'Starting and Sticking to an Exercise Programme'
- 5. O'Brien, K., *et al* (2004) 'Effectiveness of aerobic exercise in adults living with HIV: systematic review', *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 36(10)
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