Growing older and ageing with HIV

FAST FACTS

- Antiretroviral therapy (ART) now means that people living with HIV can remain healthy into old age.

- Some people experience side effects when taking treatment long term and growing older with HIV can increase the chance of experiencing normal illnesses associated with later life.

- It’s important to meet up regularly with your health professional for tests and to discuss any concerns you may have.

Now that effective treatment for HIV is available, it is considered to be a long-term condition and many people are living long and healthy lives with HIV.

In fact, a recent study suggested that over 4.2 million people living with HIV worldwide are aged over 50.1

How you feel about ageing and the issues that interest or concern you will depend on your own circumstances. Perhaps you are already enjoying retirement with friends and family around you, or you may be concerned about your housing, finances or independence as you age. It’s natural to think about these things, and it can be helpful to start planning for your older age with the support of friends and family, or local or national organisations that offer advice on these issues.

Growing older with HIV also has an impact on your health, but there are many things you can do to look after yourself.
Taking HIV treatment long term

The introduction of combination antiretroviral treatment in the mid-1990s was revolutionary. People who would previously have died as a result of HIV saw their immune systems recover. Since then, the drugs used to treat HIV have improved, and treatment keeps millions of people living with HIV well, and enables people to live long, healthy lives. In fact, some people are even living longer than the general population if they take their treatment correctly for their whole life.2

However, many of the drugs used to treat HIV have not been around for very long. Whereas short-term side-effects are well researched and documented, longer-term side-effects are less well understood. Some HIV drugs affect the kidneys, liver, bones and heart in subtle ways. As part of your routine health monitoring, your healthcare professional will keep an eye on how well your body is working, so any problems can be identified and treated early.

Ageing and HIV

As we grow older, we are more likely to experience other health conditions. There are also issues that affect our health that are associated with ageing even in people who are otherwise completely healthy, such as gradual hearing loss, receding gums, and the menopause for women.

Growing older with HIV does appear to increase the risk of experiencing illness, when compared to people who do not have HIV, but the reasons for this are not well understood.3 4

It could be that there are some long-term effects of having HIV, and/or long-term effects of taking HIV treatment. There is also the risk of long-term effects of smoking, (which is more common among people who have HIV) or being overweight.

To give yourself the best chance of a healthy older age, it’s a good idea to take action to improve your general health – stop smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat healthily and take regular exercise.

Other health conditions

Many of us develop other conditions when we get older, such as cancer, or problems with the heart, bones or kidneys.5 6 You can find out more about this in the section HIV and other health conditions.

Your healthcare professional will monitor your blood and urine tests for signs of any problems. If you think you are experiencing any new symptoms, illnesses or side-effects, it’s important to let your healthcare professional know so these can be investigated.

As we age, and experience other health issues, it’s more likely that we will be taking more medication. You may see one healthcare professional for HIV and another healthcare professional for something else. In some cases, drugs for another condition can interact with your HIV drugs, making one or both of them less effective, so it’s important that your healthcare professionals know about the drugs you are taking.7

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2. Aidsmap (2014) ‘Life expectancy now considerably exceeds the average in some people with HIV in the US’
5. WHO (2013) ‘Consolidated guidelines on the use of antiretroviral drugs for treating and preventing HIV infection’
6. Aidsmap (2015) ‘People with HIV are at higher risk of several types of cancer, large study finds’

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