

HIV, other health conditions and opportunistic infections



FAST FACTS

- Having HIV can make you more likely to get other health conditions.
- Following a healthy lifestyle, taking your HIV treatment and having support from your healthcare team will all help you to stay healthy.
- If you have another health condition as well as HIV, tell your healthcare team. They can give you advice on how to manage your health and check that any other medications you need are safe to take with your antiretroviral treatment (ART).
- There are some infections and illnesses that people with HIV are more likely to get. Your healthcare worker will give you advice on how to prevent and test for these.
- Protecting your immune system by taking ART means that you are less at risk of getting an opportunistic infection.
- If you're worried about your health or want more information on managing multiple health conditions, speak to a health care worker.

When you're first [diagnosed with HIV](#), it's likely that starting and adhering to your antiretroviral treatment (ART) will be your main health concern for a while. It's important to take time to learn about HIV and how best to manage it. It's also a good time to reflect on some of your other lifestyle habits and think about how you can look after your health in the future.

Some people have HIV as well as other long-term health conditions, such as diabetes or epilepsy. They may also develop other conditions as they get older, such as cardiovascular disease or osteoporosis. Your health care team can help you to manage these conditions alongside your HIV.

If you're feeling worried about your health or would like to find out more about HIV and other

conditions, talk to your healthcare professional. They can give you more information and help you make sense of it all.

Managing HIV and other health conditions

Preventing other health conditions

It's especially important to look after your general health when you have HIV as it increases your risk of getting certain conditions. Many health conditions are preventable and certain habits can help you to stay healthy. Some of the main ways you can prevent disease are:

- adhering to ART (taking your treatment at the right time and in the right way every day)
- eating a healthy diet
- exercising regularly
- limiting your alcohol intake
- quitting smoking.

All of these lifestyle changes can reduce your risk of getting certain health conditions known as non-communicable diseases. Non-communicable diseases are illnesses that are not infectious, and include cancers, diabetes and heart disease. For more information on how to keep your body and brain healthy, see our page on [health and wellbeing](#).

Talking to your healthcare professional about HIV and other health conditions

If you're managing another health condition alongside HIV, it's important to make sure your healthcare professionals communicate well. Often, you'll see one healthcare professional for HIV and another for the other condition(s).

In some cases, drugs for another condition can interact with your [HIV treatment](#), making one or both of them less effective or unsafe, so it's important that your healthcare professionals know about the drugs you're taking.

Ideally, your healthcare professionals should talk to each other directly, but this isn't always possible. The more you learn and understand about your health, the more you can help the flow of information between those supporting you.

It can be helpful to take some notes with you to each appointment – such as the names of any drugs you are taking, and any symptoms you want to talk about.

Common co-infections and how to prevent them

As well as through staying healthy, you can avoid some other infections by having vaccinations, screenings or preventative treatments. Here's what you can do to help prevent some of the infections that can be more common for people who have HIV.

Tuberculosis (TB)

[Tuberculosis \(TB\)](#) is one of the most common co-infections for people with HIV. TB is caused by a

bacteria. It usually affects the lungs or throat, but can also be found in other areas of the body. TB can be cured with antibiotics, but if you don't get treatment it can be very serious and even fatal. If you think you have symptoms of TB (which usually includes a persistent cough, breathlessness, fever and weight loss) you should get tested for it.

How can I prevent TB?

If you're living with HIV one of the best ways to avoid getting TB is to adhere to your ART. This will keep your immune system strong, so it can fight off infections like TB.

In places where TB is more common, it may be recommended that you take isoniazid preventative treatment (IPT). This is a course of antibiotics that can kill any TB bacteria in your body before it causes illness.

Hepatitis B and hepatitis C

[Hepatitis B](#) and [hepatitis C](#) are also common among people living with HIV and can be treated. Both infections can be more common in people who have HIV and [people who inject drugs](#). If left untreated, they can cause serious damage to the liver. Hepatitis C can be cured and chronic hepatitis B can be managed with treatment.

How can I prevent Hepatitis B and C?

Using a condom for sex and not sharing needles and other injecting equipment are some of the main ways to reduce your risk of getting or passing on hepatitis B and C.

A vaccine is available for hepatitis B. If you have HIV it's recommended that you get the hepatitis B vaccine. People with HIV are also advised to regularly test for both hepatitis B and C. It's especially important that pregnant women are tested for hepatitis B, as without treatment, the infection can be passed on to babies during pregnancy.

Cancer

The term 'cancer' covers a range of different related diseases that can affect different parts of the body. In all cases, cancer is when cells in the body start to divide uncontrollably. Different cancers can have different causes and some are more common in people who have HIV, especially as people with HIV grow older.

Some cancers are caused by lifestyle factors – such as smoking, while others are caused by infections like the human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV can cause cervical cancer and other genital cancers.

How can I reduce my risk of getting cancer?

Adhering to ART can reduce your risk of getting cancer, as this helps to keep your immune system healthy. A healthy immune system can help to stop and control abnormal cell growth. Eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly can also reduce your risk.

Some types of cancer can also be prevented with vaccines and regular screening. For example, the HPV vaccine can reduce your risk of getting cervical, anal and genital cancers.

HIV and opportunistic infections

When someone with HIV has a weakened immune system (shown by a low CD4 count), they are at risk of 'opportunistic infections'. These are illnesses that are more common among those with weak immune systems. If your immune system is strong, it can normally stop you from getting these infections.

Common opportunistic infections associated with HIV include:

- cryptococcal meningitis
- toxoplasmosis
- PCP (a type of pneumonia)
- oesophageal candidiasis
- certain cancers, including Kaposi's sarcoma.

If you have a low CD4 count, there are medicines available that can prevent opportunistic infections. However, being on effective ART and keeping your CD4 count up is the best way to avoid opportunistic infections.

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