

Taking care of yourself when living with HIV



FAST FACTS

- Starting antiretroviral treatment as soon as possible, and sustaining it as part of your everyday routine, is the best way of ensuring that your immune system stays strong.
- Exercising regularly, eating well, getting enough rest and quality sleep are all vital to maintaining 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 healthy life in the way that you choose to do. With the right [treatment](#) and care, you can expect to live as long as someone who doesn't have HIV. Find out how you can look after yourself and stay healthy.

Taking antiretroviral treatment for HIV

If you've been diagnosed with HIV then [starting treatment](#) as soon as possible is the first step to taking care of yourself and keeping your immune system strong. Although antiretroviral treatment is not a [cure](#) for HIV, it does keep the virus under control.

Like a lot of medication, you may experience some side effects in the first few months. If they persist and are affecting your quality of life, you should be able to switch to a [different drug regimen](#).

Once you start treatment, the key to staying well is to make sure that you take it regularly as prescribed – which usually means every day at the same time. Skipping doses, or taking it at different

times each day, will stop it from protecting your immune system.

Eating healthily

Nutritional advice for people living with HIV is the same as for people with a negative status: eat a [balanced diet](#), without too much processed fat, sugar or salt. This will also help your body to absorb the treatment and fight off everyday infections.

You may benefit from talking to your healthcare professional about your diet if you:

- are underweight (perhaps because HIV was already making you unwell by the time you were diagnosed)
- are overweight
- have any particular dietary problems
- are experiencing side effects that make it hard to eat well.

If you're having problems taking your HIV treatment, talk to your healthcare professional as soon as possible to get help and support



Exercising regularly

Being active is a part of maintaining your health for everyone – it builds muscle, keeps your bones strong, your heart healthy and burns fat. Some people who are [living with HIV](#) lose muscle mass and strength - exercising regularly helps prevent this. Exercise also reduces feelings of stress and symptoms of depression.

Avoid excessive alcohol or drug use

If you are living with HIV, there are specific risks associated with alcohol and recreational drug use that you should be aware of. Alcohol can damage the liver which the body uses to process anti-HIV drugs, so it is good to keep your alcohol consumption within the recommended limits. Heavy drinking and taking recreational drugs can also weaken your immune system, making it harder for your body to recover from infections.

Certain anti-HIV drugs can interact with recreational drugs and alcohol to cause unwanted side effects, some of which can be severe. For example, you could feel dizzy or pass out, making you potentially vulnerable. If you are worried about drug interactions, have an honest conversation with a healthcare professional and they will be able to advise you. You should also be aware that being under the influence of alcohol or other drugs may stop you taking your HIV medication properly, for example, you may forget to take a dose or too much alcohol may make you vomit. If you are sick within one hour of taking your HIV medication you should retake the dose.

If you're concerned about your [alcohol or drug use](#), talk to a healthcare professional for advice and support.

Managing stress and getting support

Looking after your mental wellbeing and emotional health is just as important as taking care of your body.

[Finding out you have HIV](#) can be a shock, and it may take you some time to adjust. Talking to your friends and family, and other people living with HIV, can really help when things get difficult. You could look for a peer mentoring or buddying service in your area.

Once you adjust to living with HIV, it's a good idea to think about what you want out of life. What are your goals? What's important to you? Maybe you want to study, travel, [have a family](#) or change career? Don't let HIV stop you, there's no reason why it should.

What else can I do to take care of myself?

Many of the things we do to take care of ourselves are common sense, such as eating well, exercising and getting plenty of rest and sleep.

However, if you're living with HIV, checking in with your healthcare professional regularly is also important. They should monitor you for [other health conditions](#), which you may experience more as you age, and adjust your treatment as needed.

Teeth and mouth complaints are more common among people living with HIV. Regular brushing, flossing and seeing your dentist can lower the risk of cavities and mouth infections.



HELP US HELP OTHERS

Avert.org is helping to prevent the spread of HIV and improve sexual health by giving people trusted, up-to date information.

We provide all this for FREE, but it takes time and money to keep Avert.org going.

Can you support us and protect our future?

Every contribution helps, no matter how small.

PLEASE DONATE NOW

©iStock.com/FG Trade. Photos are used for illustrative purposes. They do not imply any health status or behaviour on the part of the people in the photo.

Last full review:

18 June 2018

Next full review:

17 June 2021



Sources:

Aidsmap (2016) 'Healthy eating' (Accessed June 2018)

WHO (2015) 'Guideline on when to start antiretroviral therapy and on pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV' (Accessed June 2018)

NHS Choices (2016) 'The Eatwell Plate' (Accessed June 2018)

Aidsmap (2015) 'Starting and Sticking to an Exercise Programme' (Accessed June 2018)