Understanding and coping with HIV

What is HIV?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes AIDS—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. If you get infected with HIV, your body will try to fight the infection by producing "antibodies." When these antibodies are detected in your blood weeks or months later, you will test positive for the HIV virus.



Anyone can become infected with HIV and develop AIDS. People infected with HIV range from infants to adult men and women of all sexual orientations.

HIV attacks the body's immune system, which defends the body against disease, and weakens it over time. Some individuals who have HIV may be symptom-free for more than 10 to 15 years. The following are some symptoms individuals infected with HIV experience:

- Sores or white spots in mouth
- Swollen lymph glands
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme fatigue
- Persistent flu-like symptoms/chronic fever
- Night sweats
- Difficulty breathing
- Persistent cough
- Frequent diarrhea
- Skin rash or lesions
- Loss of appetite
- Persistent yeast infections (women only)
- Persistent pelvic inflammatory infection (women only)
- Neurological problems

Consider the following coping strategies:

Eat well. Try to incorporate these foods into your meals as often as possible. They’re key to your good health and longevity:

- Vegetables and fruits
- Whole grains
- Chicken and fish
- Beans
- Fermented food (such as sauerkraut and kimchi)
- Nuts and seeds

Reduce intake of junk foods and foods that contain a lot of white flour, sugar or chemical additives.

If you’re looking for ideas on just how to incorporate more of these healthful foods in your diet:

- Read cookbooks
- Consult a naturopath or doctor knowledgeable in nutrition
- Visit a health food store
- Experiment with various foods to find what works for you

Take supplements. People living with HIV or AIDS need additional vitamins and minerals and other supplements in addition to healthy foods. Additional supplements help you not only to stay healthy, but to

recover faster from illness, and reduce the toxic effects of the drugs you may be taking. Consult a naturopath or doctor or a reputable source for more on which vitamins you need.

Consider the "alternatives". Some people living with HIV or AIDS have received benefit from working with alternative therapists in naturopathy, acupuncture, massage, etc. Alternative or complementary medicine can provide symptom relief and psychological benefits. Be sure to advise your primary care physician of any alternative treatments you are exploring, so that he or she has a full picture.

Get enough rest. People living with HIV or AIDS tend to become fatigued easily. Try to get at least eight hours of sleep per night, and take naps throughout the day if needed. If you are unable to sleep at night, try to do things that calm you, such as relaxing with a warm bath, listening to calming music or relaxation tapes, etc.

Exercise. Not only does regular exercise help to relax you, it also stimulates your immune system, oxygenates your blood and improves your circulation. Overall, exercise makes you stronger and healthier.

Travel. Travel can lift our spirits! Once you take precautions about food and water, you can travel and stay healthy.

1. Before buying your plane ticket, it is important to check that the country or countries you are planning to visit do not have policies that restrict your entry. It is also important to purchase cancellation insurance and travel health insurance just in case you become ill prior to your departure, or while out of the country.
2. Check with your physician regarding vaccinations you may need to keep you safe while on your trip. Be aware that live virus vaccines are not recommended for people with HIV. Be cautious about getting too much sun as it suppresses your immune system. This can cause a herpes outbreak in individuals with HIV. In addition, some drugs such as AZT and Septra can make individuals with HIV more sensitive to the sun and can cause you to burn more easily.

Where can I find more information about HIV/AIDS?

There are support groups and resource networks in most Canadian cities. These organizations can usually connect you with the information, support and services you're looking for. If you're looking for more information on organizations and services in your community:

- Look in your local yellow pages
- Ask your doctor or trusted health care professional
- Ask trusted and knowledgeable friends or colleagues
- Call a "Community Access" organization in your community
- Contact the AIDS committee in your region for resources in your area

If at any time you feel that the stress is just too difficult to cope with on your own, there are professional counsellors and therapists who can help you. Don't hesitate to reach out for help.