



Drug Information

General Approaches to Treating HIV

Last updated September 2003

Treating HIV means more than just taking medications. It also means making changes in your life that will enhance your health and prevent you from getting sick.

In general, you can consider HIV treatments in 3 main areas:

- Controlling the HIV virus
- Improving your own health and immune system
- Preventing illnesses and HIV/AIDS related infections

Controlling the HIV Virus:

This usually includes anti-HIV drugs (anti-retrovirals) that reduce the amount of HIV virus in your body or slow down its reproduction. The less HIV virus in your body and the more T cells you have, the healthier you can be.

Deciding to start anti-HIV drugs can be a big decision. The medications may help reduce the HIV virus in your body and help your body to fight off infections better. They may also have side effects that can be unpleasant or even harmful.

You have to be ready before you start these medications because usually they need to be taken on a regular schedule every day for them to work. This may involve making some changes in your daily routine and habits.

It is important that you find a doctor who is knowledgeable about HIV treatments and is sensitive to your situation and culture to work with you in making these treatment decisions.

In general, anti-HIV medications are recommended if:

- Your T-cell count is less than 350
- Your viral load is greater than 55,000
- If you have had any symptoms of HIV disease.

The standard of HIV treatment nowadays includes the use of a combination of at least 3 different anti-HIV drugs, including drugs from different classes.

Improving your health and immune system:

This includes many methods that promote general health and taking therapies that may enhance your immune system.

Some basic approaches include:

- Getting emotional and spiritual support to deal with your stress
- A nutritious diet
- Having adequate rest
- Regular exercises
- Taking vitamins and mineral supplements that enhance your general health



- Taking medications, herbs and supplements that strengthen the immune system
- Using other complimentary therapies

Preventing Illnesses and HIV related infections:

This includes screening for diseases, having immunizations to prevent diseases and taking certain medications to prevent some common infections in people with HIV/AIDS.

Screening tests recommended for people with HIV include:

- Regular blood work (every 2 to 6 months depending on your health) to check your immune system (T-cell count), the activity of the virus (Viral Load), complete blood count, and the functions of your body's different organs and systems (e.g. kidney and liver).
- Initial screening blood test to check if you have been exposed to some infections common in people with HIV, such as like hepatitis (B and C), CMV, Toxoplasmosis, syphilis.
- Swabs to screen all common sexually transmitted diseases
- Chest X-ray initially and TB skin test once a year
- Pap smear at least once a year for women

Immunizations that are recommended for people with HIV include:

- Pneumonia vaccine (once every 5 years)
- Flu vaccine (once a year around winter time)
- Hepatitis B vaccine (if you have not been exposed to the hepatitis B virus already)
- Hepatitis A vaccine (if you have not been exposed to the hepatitis A virus already)
- Booster vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and polio (once every 10 years)

Medications recommended for preventing HIV related infections include:

- If your T-cell count is below 200, you should take medication to prevent PCP, a common form of HIV related pneumonia. Common medications used for this purpose include: Septra (TMP/SMX), Dapsone (Avlosulfon), Mepron (Atovaquone) or aerosolized Pentamidine by inhalation.
- If your T-cell count is below 100, consider taking medication to prevent MAC (mycobacterium avium complex), a bacterial infection that can cause many symptoms in the body. Common medications used for this purpose include: Zithromax (azithromycin), Biaxin (clarithromycin) and Mycobutin (rifabutin).
- In addition, if you suffers from repeated herpes or yeast infections, your doctor may recommend regular medications to be taken to prevent these infections.

Make sure you discuss with your doctor and pharmacist about all the prescription and non-prescription drugs you are taking, including complementary therapies, herbs and supplements, so that they can get a complete picture of your treatment and be able to advise you of any possible interactions amongst them.

Copyright @ACAS 2001 & 2003. This fact sheet is produced by ACAS (Asian Community AIDS Services) and is available in English, Chinese (Traditional and Simplified), Tagalog and Vietnamese. Funding for this project is provided by the Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN) and Health Canada. Copies can be downloaded at : www.acas.org/treatment. ACAS provides comprehensive support and case management services for Asian people living with HIV/AIDS; and HIV/AIDS prevention education to the east and southeast Asian Canadian populations in the Greater Toronto Area. ACAS is located at 33 Isabella Street, Suite 107, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2P7. Tel: (416)-963-4300, Fax: (416)-963-4371 Email: support@acas.org

mpt to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information contained in this website/ fact sheet, the information provided here are designed for reference purposes only. These information should not be relied upon as a substitute for medical advice from a qualified professional health care provider and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a condition or illness. Please consult a physician if you have any concerns about your health, treatment regimen and questions related to HIV/AIDS. ACAS, its employees and board members will not be responsible for any loss or harm, however arising, from the use of, or reliance on this information.