Some Big Facts About the Big C

Can HIV-positive people lower their risk of cancer death?

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Numerous studies say cancer is more common among HIV-positive people than their age-matched negative peers. An analysis of cancers among more than 20,000 people receiving HIV treatment from 1996 to 2009 offers clues that might help you manage your cancer risk.

In the study, Chad Achenbach, MD, and associates at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago examined cancer mortalities and found some links to better rates of survival (and perhaps avoidance). While you can't control some risk factors—such as being older when you receive a diagnosis of cancer—you can control others.

One you can control, Achenbach says, is treating cancer early; another is treating HIV effectively. "Being aggressive with HIV treatment—including starting meds at a higher CD4 cell count—will benefit you," Achenbach says. In his study, low CD4 counts were associated with low survival rates.

Early cancer detection helps too. "Remind your [doctor] that cancer rates are higher among people with HIV," he says, "so you need regular, age-appropriate screenings." Should positive people get screened before "appropriate" age—earlier than their negative counterparts? That's Achenbach's next question for analysis.

Achenbach also advises moderating your drinking and quitting smoking, if applicable. But you already knew that.

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