



Good Eating

Balanced nutrition is a key to overall health, especially if you're living with HIV.

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A healthy diet can help you live long and well with HIV. Nutrients from food provide the raw material for cells and organs and support optimal functioning of all body systems. A well-balanced diet improves energy and strength, helps maintain a healthy weight, promotes good immune function and improves quality of life.

A healthy diet is especially important for people living with HIV, as the virus can increase nutritional needs, and poor nutrition can worsen disease progression. Even among people with well-controlled HIV, chronic viral infection triggers persistent immune activation and inflammation, which can affect metabolism and energy expenditure. What's more, people with HIV are more likely to have coexisting health concerns, and eating well reduces the risk for heart disease, diabetes, fatty liver disease and several types of cancer.

People with more advanced HIV—or any serious illness—may burn calories faster and may not absorb nutrients as well. Opportunistic infections and medication side effects can cause vomiting and diarrhea, which can lead to nutrient loss. In the early years of the epidemic, wasting syndrome was a hallmark of AIDS, but today, overweight and obesity are more common among people living with HIV in the United States, and some antiretroviral medications have been linked to weight gain.

Diet recommendations can be confusing, as food fads come and go and guidelines change based on the latest nutrition research. The guidance you remember from childhood may no longer reflect current thinking about what and how much to eat.

People living with HIV who are on anti-retroviral treatment with viral suppression and an adequate CD4 T-cell count can generally follow the same nutrition guidelines as the population at large. Instead of struggling to follow complex dietary rules, most people find it easier to look at the overall picture and try to choose healthful foods most of the time.

Experts recommend a balanced diet that includes a wide variety of foods, which usually provides an ample supply of vitamins, minerals, amino acids, essential fatty acids and antioxidants. Some people can benefit from supplements, but more is not necessarily better, and too much can be harmful. Focus on whole foods that have not been heavily processed and don't contain a lot of added sugar, salt and unhealthy fats.

When shopping for produce, select fruits and vegetables with a variety of colors: Green, yellow, orange, red and purple ones contain different nutrients. When choosing bread, pasta or rice, opt for brown whole grain varieties instead of white ones, as the refining process removes nutrients along with color. Include plant-based protein sources, like beans, lentils, nuts and tofu, in addition to lean meat and poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy products. Water and other fluids are an important part of your diet. Coffee and tea contain healthful bioflavonoids, but cut back on caffeine if it interferes with your sleep.

The latest dietary guidelines recommend developing a customized healthy eating plan that incorporates personal preferences, cultural traditions and budget constraints. Standard dietary recommendations might need to be modified based on your individual needs and circumstances.

Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble eating, are unintentionally losing or gaining more weight than you want or if you feel like you're not getting necessary nutrients. A registered dietitian can help develop a personalized diet plan that meets your needs.