6 Reasons to Swallow

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One of the biggest decisions when it comes to one's HIV care is whether or not to start taking HIV medication. It may sound like a no-brainer but for those directly affected it's not an easy decision to make. Until a cure is found, starting a HIV treatment is a lifetime commitment filled with new rules and schedules. Not only does one have to deal with the reality of HIV but also other factors come into play like cost, fear of side effects and stigma. It's a lifestyle adjustment and yet it has its benefits. Benefits such as making one's HIV manageable and the allowance of a normal life. But how does one make that choice and what should one consider before taking HIV medication?

According to the CDC just half of HIV-positive men who have sex with men got the treatment that could save their lives in 2010. During the moments after my own HIV diagnosis, one of my fears was feeling I had to rely on pills to maintain my health. I considered myself a self-sufficient person and wanted to be in the driver seat when it came to my health. I defiantly didn't want the dependency on any external factors. Especially something I seemed I had to swallow on a monthly basis.

Despite my doubts I finally gave in and it wasn't as bad as I thought. One of the deciding factors was knowing it was much easier to address my status while I was healthy and not waiting until it became more complex. Also after seeing my t-cells drop low and watching my viral level reach new heights, I knew I had to do something and attempting to place my head in the sand wouldn't change my HIV status. So starting a HIV medication wasn't easy but it was one of the best decisions I could make. Of course it took some adjustments but nothing I wasn't able to manage. In fact I feel starting a medication regimen has contributed to my current well being.

Not everyone who tests positive needs to take HIV meds right away. Starting medication consists of several factors your doctor will take into account. They'll take into consideration your T-cell count, viral load and any other health conditions you may have. So for those undecided I would like to offer six good reasons to consider swallowing.

1. It allows you to be proactive rather than reactive

Starting a medication regimen allows one to gain control over their health rather than feel as if you're losing control. You're now taking charge of your health and not having a feeling of 'whatever happens, happens' emotion. You're telling your own self that although you never asked for the disease, its control of you stops right here! Control is the key word as you don't give it up by taking medication. You instead are making the choice to have a long healthy life.

2. You’re healthier than those without HIV

I know it may be hard to believe but in some cases those who follow a regular medication schedule which includes doctor visits, have a greater chance to receive preventive care. Taking medication requires regular visits to your doctor to see how effective the pills are. Starting out it may be monthly but as you both track your health, it can be as long as three months between visits. It’s during this time your doctor check for other issues which may need addressing or show up in your blood work. Compared to those who are negative and may see a doctor only when symptoms appear, HIV positive have a more proactive head-start. So although HIV was the primary reason for your visit, you can now address any new unrelated concerns.

3. It has become simpler

In the past when a person started taking HIV medication it wasn’t abnormal to take several pills a day, often as much as 10. In my case it seemed like I was taking a gazillion based on what I was prescribed. That’s no longer the case for me and many others. HIV medication has become simple to take and based on when one starts, it can be easy as one pill a day. Just like taking a vitamin. It also helps for those who are not ready to explain why they have so many pills bottles in their medicine cabinet in addition to making it easier for those traveling.

4. It’s not just the pills keeping you healthy

When deciding to take HIV medication, understand it’s only one part of your health plan. Just because one becomes positive doesn’t strip them of their ability of self-care. Sometimes HIV medication gets all the credit when the credit is because you were already a strong individual. You just got help during this difficult time. Your medication isn’t and shouldn’t feel like a crutch. Knowing your determination plays a big role is crucial.

5. Not all doctors are the same

The reality is that one may have attempted to start HIV medication but the doctor prescribing it didn’t seem to care what the patient needed or wanted. With a one sided doctor-patient relationship, it may seem hopeless especially if you’re having trouble with your medication. Know that there are always options especially if communication with your doctor seems like it’s hitting a brick wall. No matter what your health plan is, everyone has the right to change their doctor. You want to find one that listens to you and give you options that work for your life. On the other hand if another doctor is reinforcing what your previous doctors have recommended it may be an opportunity to hear them out and make a wise decision.

6. Everyone HIV is not the same

It’s true that there are some people who have been HIV positive for years and never been on

medication-yet they seem to be doing fine. If your decision to delay HIV medication based on someone else's history, you should reconsider. HIV affects everyone differently. Those on a lifestyle without meds for years are not usually the norm. Your experience will be your own and shouldn't be measured simply on others. Before deciding to not take HIV medication, just realize it won't hurt to get a second opinion from a professional.

So as I write these words, understand I was a person who was strongly against taking meds. In all my years there has been only one case when a medication caused me side effects. As I enter my 29th year with the virus, I give myself much of the credit but also have to acknowledge the assistance of the pill. So now if I'm asked if I swallow, I will gladly say yes!

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