

## Living with HIV/AIDS – are you at risk of cardiovascular disease?

World AIDS day falls on 1<sup>st</sup> of December and the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA would like to raise awareness about the link between HIV/AIDS and cardiovascular disease. By adopting a healthy lifestyle, people living with HIV/AIDS can help maintain their immune wellness and prevent metabolic complications that may lead to cardiovascular disease.

### ARVs in the treatment for HIV

So far ARVs are the only scientifically approved treatment for HIV. Although they are not a cure for HIV, they stop the replication of the virus, preventing the weakening of the immune system and helping prolong life. As with any other medication, ARVs have side effects – some are minor while others are major - depending on one's individual reaction. Some of these may include longer term changes such as alterations in metabolism and body shape.

**Metabolic changes** may include raised levels of cholesterol and triglycerides (another type of fat in the blood), high blood pressure as well as resistance to insulin resulting in diabetes.

These are all well-known risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

**Lipodystrophy syndrome** - uneven distribution of fat may result in body shape changes such as an increase in waist size and thinning of the arms, legs, buttocks and face. Changes may also include an increase in the fat pad at the back of the neck (buffalo hump) while some women may experience a significant enlargement of the breasts.

**Osteoporosis** and poor bone health could be caused by certain ARV's, so adequate calcium and vitamin D would be recommended in these cases.

Although some of these body-shape and metabolic changes may be difficult and confusing, discontinuing ARV therapy is not a favourable option. One should rather discuss problems with a healthcare professional to help manage side-effects and to make the necessary lifestyle changes.

### Diet, exercise and lifestyle recommendations

We all know that good nutrition plays an important role in keeping the immune system healthy and it would certainly help in reducing the progression of HIV to AIDS as well as reduce the severity of infectious complications. Bear in mind though that there is no single magic bullet for boosting the immune system or for maintaining cardiovascular wellness. The best advice is to follow a healthy, balanced diet that includes a variety of all the food groups:

**Starches/cereals** supply the body with energy, fibre and valuable vitamins and minerals - so should form the basis of all meals. Fibre helps lower cholesterol levels and control blood glucose levels. Good options include whole grain breads/cereals, oats, rye, barley, brown or wild rice. Try to include pulses such as lentils, beans and peas as well as other starchy vegetables like potatoes, corn and sweet potatoes.

**Fruit and vegetables** - eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables per day. Especially deep yellow, orange, red and dark green ones that are rich sources of antioxidants (vitamins A, C, E) which support the immune system and help prevent the oxidation of LDL cholesterol, one of the main triggers of atherosclerosis.

**Dairy foods** are an important source of calcium and may protect against heart disease, high blood pressure and insulin resistance. Aim for 2-3 portions of low fat or fat-free dairy products per day.

**Meat, fish and poultry** are protein foods which help to build/repair the body's muscles and keep the immune system healthy. Focus on lean options and healthier cooking methods. Increase intake of fatty fish (rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fats) and chicken while reducing red meat intake.

**Fats** – focus on eating healthier fats: substitute saturated fats (butter, lard, animal fat/skin) and trans fats (hard margarine, fried fast foods) with polyunsaturated (soft margarine, vegetable oils) and mono-unsaturated fats (olive oil, peanut butter, nuts, avocado).

**Salt** should be used sparingly as it contributes to high blood pressure.

**Alcohol** is harmful to the liver and interferes with immunity by depleting the body of vitamins and minerals. Some ARVs can cause dangerous side effects (such as pancreatitis – an

inflammation of the pancreas) when combined with alcohol. People on ARVs are thus advised not to drink any alcoholic drinks.

**Stop smoking** – as it causes more lung infections which can be very serious with HIV/AIDS.

**Be as active as possible** – to help keep the muscles strong, maintain muscle mass, stimulate appetite, lower blood cholesterol and blood pressure levels as well as relieve stress. Aerobic exercise may also help to reduce HIV-associated fat accumulation in the waist area. All forms of physical activity are beneficial: daily household chores, walking, swimming and dancing.

**Stress** – living with HIV/AIDS can cause tremendous anxiety and strain in one's life. Stress can harm the immune system – seek help and get advice for reducing stress, developing a positive mindset and improving emotional wellness.

ARVs can be life-saving for people living with HIV. To prevent resistance it is vital that people take medication exactly as prescribed without missing any doses. To help cope with side effects and manage complications, discuss areas of concern with your healthcare professional and make the necessary lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease. For more details and nutritional advice, contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 during office hours, or visit [www.heartfoundation.co.za](http://www.heartfoundation.co.za)

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