

TOP 10 HIV TREATMENT MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

This resource has been designed to assist people living with HIV with their decision to commence HIV treatment.

It is very important that people living with HIV make decisions about their health based on sound knowledge and an ability to dismiss myths and misconceptions about HIV treatments.

The “*myths and misconceptions*” have been drawn from interviews and feedback of people living with HIV and the following advice contained in this resource is best complemented by speaking to your doctor and with other informed people living with HIV.

1.

I feel healthy, why would I want to put toxic chemicals in to my body?

The latest scientific information is that untreated HIV can be causing damage to your body at any stage of infection, that is whether your HIV infection is recent or longer term. We recommend that all people with HIV start a conversation with their doctor about the latest thinking around commencing HIV treatment. There are now millions of people taking HIV treatment around the world, which is resulting in dramatic reductions in HIV illnesses and allowing many people to live full and healthy lives.

Today, HIV treatment is very effective in controlling HIV and although it is true that some people experience side effects, generally the drugs are well tolerated. In any case, the immediate and long-term damage being done by having untreated HIV is likely to be more harmful. Commencing treatment will protect your immune system from further damage by HIV, for the long-term benefit of your health.

2.

I've heard that there are horrible side effects and I will have to stop working.

It is true that early HIV drugs were associated with serious side effects for some people, but since that time, treatment has greatly improved, with a number of options for people wanting to control their HIV. Today treatment is generally well tolerated, easy to take with few or no ongoing side effects.

Most people do not have any problems when commencing treatments. If you are concerned, start prior to a weekend or take a few days off work or study for the first few days. Commencing treatment can be scary for some people but the best way of dealing with this is starting when you are feeling ready and in control. This way you are in the best position to deal with any issues that may come up.

3.

I've heard that after you become infected with HIV, the virus becomes "latent" or inactive and that I can wait for years before starting treatment.

HIV is active through all stages of HIV infection, whether you have recently become HIV positive or have been living with the virus for some years. Commencing early on treatment is now widely recommended to keep your immune system protected and to help minimize the risk of developing HIV related problems, such as heart disease, memory issues, bone disease and cancers. People with HIV are at higher risk of developing these health issues compared to HIV negative people. Being on successful treatment also helps reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to others, when used alongside other measures like condoms.

4.

I'm going to the gym, doing yoga and meditation. I don't feel sick. Why go on medication now? I would rather use "complementary" or "alternative" therapies I think are natural rather than take toxic drugs.

There are many things you can do to help keep healthy, including stopping smoking, eating well and engaging in exercise. Some people with HIV choose to take vitamins, supplements and other complementary therapies. However, there is no good evidence that these therapies have any impact on HIV or the course of HIV related disease. Some of these therapies are potentially harmful and may interfere with HIV drugs and other medicines. Except in very rare situations, people with HIV will need to take HIV treatment to prevent ongoing immune system decline and the development of HIV related illnesses and death.

5.

If I go on HIV treatment, I'll feel like I'm 'weak' and I'm basically saying to myself that I'm giving in to the virus.

For many people, commencing treatment is an empowering experience. Treatment can mean that people feel less anxiety about their HIV and the sense that they are making a choice that will result in long-term health and wellbeing. While not on treatments people may feel a lingering sense of uncertainty as to what the uncontrolled virus might be doing to their body.

6.

What happens if the HIV treatments don't work? Or I just can't handle them?

There are now many different HIV treatment options, so it's usually just a case of finding the right combination for you. Having a talk with your doctor about your lifestyle daily routine and other medications, recreational drugs or complementary therapies that you take can help determine which HIV treatment combination is best for you. Once you commence taking treatments, if you are having problems, either with side-effects or remembering to take your medication, talk to your doctor about finding a better treatment combination for you.

7.

I don't think I could be disciplined enough to take treatment every day for the rest of my life.

It's important to ensure that your HIV treatment fits your routine, in that way remembering to take your medication on time, every time is made easier. Taking your treatments each day might sound like a chore, but once it is part of the things you do daily, like brushing your teeth, or having your morning coffee, you will find it can be just part of your daily routine.

8.

I don't want people to find my pills or see me taking them.

Some treatments are once a day, so you could take them before you leave the house in the morning or at night before you go to bed. Many people use pillboxes that have the days of the week printed on them. These pill boxes are not only a great way of remembering your daily dose, they are also handy for storing your medication.

There are heaps of ways you can disguise your pills such as putting them in a different container (with the label inside so you can refer back to it) and keeping them somewhere else apart from the kitchen or bathroom cabinet.

9.

I'm worried that if I miss a dose my virus will become resistant or change into a 'super' bug.

It is important to take your treatments every day. Doing this will mean that you're HIV will remain controlled. Missing the occasional single dose might not be a problem, however if you miss a lot of doses then 'drug resistance' can develop.

If you find taking your drugs on time, every time a problem, talk to your doctor. Some treatments may be easier to take than others. Your doctor can work with you to find the best combination for your routine. Today, there are many HIV treatments available and finding the right one for you will mean that they will work better at combating HIV and maintain your control over the virus.

10.

While I am not on treatments I can almost forget that I have HIV.

Once I start I'll be reminded daily that "I am HIV positive".

Many people take their pill daily and remind themselves that they are doing something good for their body. They are healthy and 'that' pill is keeping them in control. People find this as a useful way of turning this 'negative' feeling around and into a 'positive' feeling.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT HIV TREATMENT?

Email us at treatments@livingpositivevictoria.org.au and we will find the answer for you.

Contact us on 9863 8733 or info@livingpositivevictoria.org.au

USEFUL LINKS:

VICTORIA

Living Positive Victoria
Victorian AIDS Council (VAC)

NSW

Positive Life NSW
AIDS Council of NSW (ACON)

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Positive Life South Australia
Gay Men's Health SA

QUEENSLAND

Queensland Positive People (QPP)
Queensland AIDS Council (QuAC)

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Western Australian AIDS Council (WAAC)

TASMANIA

Living Positive Victoria
Tasmanian Council on AIDS and Related Diseases (TASCARD)

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Northern Territory AIDS & Hepatitis Council

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Association of People with HIV (NAPWHA)
Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations (AFAO)



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