

# LIVING WELL WITH HIV

*For many older people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), their early experience with HIV was focused almost entirely on staying alive. With modern treatments enabling people to live longer with few side effects, the focus has shifted to improving one's quality of life, making HIV easier to manage.*

*Living well with HIV means looking after your whole self, not just HIV itself. To do this, people with HIV need to look after all aspects of their wellbeing: their physical health, including diet, nutrition, and exercise; their relationships and sexual health; their mental and emotional health; and their medical care and support.*

*All these facets of wellbeing are interconnected; when we don't look after one of them, all the other aspects suffer.*

## MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

People with HIV are far more likely than others to experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues. One's sense of mental wellbeing affects the whole of their health. It can lead to cognitive impairment, meaning the person might forget to take their medication or attend medical appointments. It can make it difficult for them to look after their nutrition and physical wellness.

The signs of mental and emotional difficulty vary from person to person, but often appear as an extended period (two weeks or more) of withdrawal, fatigue, distraction, and hopelessness. A key part of maintaining good mental health is knowing the signs and getting help for any problems. BeyondBlue offers a free support hotline on 1300 224 636, and website with extensive information for LGBTI people (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/for-me/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people>).

## EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Physical health is an important part of maintaining overall wellbeing. No matter a person's age or physical condition, it is important to undertake some form of exercise to maintain physical health. Australian guidelines recommend 30 minutes of exercise every day. Exercise should include weight-bearing exercises or strength training twice or three times a week. Exercises that help to maintain and increase flexibility (stretching, gardening, dancing, yoga etc.) and balance are also very important for older people. It doesn't need to be strenuous exercise, but should be enough to elevate your heartrate somewhat. For people limited in what they can do physically, it is important to talk to a doctor about the best activities for maintaining physical health.

## DIET AND NUTRITION

People living with HIV often have different nutritional needs than others. Due to the increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, they should focus on eating a balanced diet of regular meals made from a variety of fresh whole foods. Not only does this contribute to physical wellbeing, but it prevents malnutrition, a common problem in older people with HIV. Because different people have different needs, and different foods may interact with certain medications, it is important to consult with a doctor when changing your diet. If you're in Melbourne, the Melbourne Sexual Health Clinic offers dietitian consultations out of its Green Room clinic. For more information call the Green Room on (03) 9341 6214.

## SEXUAL HEALTH

People often misunderstand the level of, and desire for, sexual activity among older adults, let alone those living with HIV. They may have personal beliefs or attitudes that are non-accepting of diverse sexualities, or they may simply not be aware of issues faced by transgender and intersex people. Positive sexual health is not just the absence of disease or dysfunction; it is a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships. It is important in everyone's life, and helps protect against stressors that come from living with a chronic illness. Affirmation and positive recognition of a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity can help promote good sexual health. For more information, please refer *Chapter 4: Living Longer and Ageing with HIV – Sexual Health, Sexuality and Gender Issues* in the *Positive Caring* handbook <http://www.livingpositivevictoria.org.au/speakers/senior-voices-project>

## RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT

Having supportive relationships is an integral part of a person's health and wellbeing. Romantic relationships are just one of a number of kinds of relationships that can contribute to a person's sense of wellness. Family members, friends, social groups, activity circles, and can all help a person feel supported. With social isolation, and its negative impact on overall health - shown to be an issue for many older people with HIV — it is important to maintain and nurture relationships and support systems. Though it can help to associate with people familiar with HIV, it can also be beneficial to reach outside those circles, making HIV feel like less of the burden it often seems.

For people living in and around Melbourne, the Victorian AIDS Council offers services and support for people living with HIV at the Positive Living Centre at 51 Commercial Road, Prahran. For more information and this and on resources for people in rural and regional areas, contact Living Positive Victoria at (03) 9863 8733, or on its website at <http://www.livingpositivevictoria.org.au>

## MEDICAL CARE

Though all the information above may be useful, there is no substitute for a close and proactive relationship with your HIV specialist and GP. Together, they can develop a chronic disease management plan which looks at your health and wellbeing holistically. They will understand your particular needs and can best advise you on your care. By being aware of your health and active in your own care, you and your doctors can develop a plan that enables you to live a happy and healthy life with HIV.