

HIV AND AGING

There's no denying the life-extending benefits of antiretroviral therapy. While it has allowed many people living with HIV to plan for their golden years, it has also meant preparing to face age-related health problems. According to the CDC, 25 percent of those living with the virus are over 50. In turn, there's a growing need for comprehensive care to prevent and manage typical age-related maladies, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis—all of which can be complicated by HIV and its treatment.

IS IT HIV OR AGE?

When you're over 50 and HIV positive, it can be hard to distinguish normal signs of aging from HIV infection itself or HIV med side effects. While research has shown that HIV and its medications can increase the risk of health problems like heart disease, weakened bones and cancer, traditional risk factors like family history, smoking and diet/exercise also play a major role—and become increasingly relevant as we age.

Figuring out if it's your HIV, your antiretrovirals and/or other factors that are contributing to a health problem—or putting you at risk for one—requires careful communication and coordination with your health care provider. This means keeping an eye on your “whole health,” not just your viral load and CD4 cell counts. Regular physical exams; lab tests to monitor the health of your heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and other organs; and taking steps to eliminate risky behaviors are all essential to aging well with HIV.

WHAT ARE HEALTH ISSUES TO WATCH OUT FOR?

- **Cardiovascular disease:** As we age, cholesterol builds up in our arteries, so our risk of a heart attack or stroke increases. HIV and its meds may further increase the risk. Positive people over 50, especially men, should talk with their providers about closely monitoring cholesterol levels and blood pressure, and consider risk-reducing habits: exercising, quitting smoking and eating a healthy diet.
- **Cancer:** Studies show that prostate, breast and colon cancer aren't more common in HIV-positive people. But having HIV does increase the risk of some cancers caused by viruses, such as KS, lymphoma and cervical or anal tumors. It may also increase the risk of a few other cancers, including lung and skin cancer. But none of these are common and all can be detected in early, treatable stages through regular screening.
- **Bone problems:** Weakened bones—osteopenia and osteoporosis—can occur with age, notably in women after they stop menstruating, and have also been tied to HIV and its treatment. An easy and painless test called DEXA scanning can help you and your health care provider monitor your bone health and determine if you're at risk for a serious fracture. Vitamin D and calcium supplements might be recommended, and prescription medications to help reverse bone loss are also available.
- **Cognitive problems:** Mental function, including memory and concentration, tend to decline as we age, but cognitive impairment can also be due to HIV infection and some meds. While there are many possible treatments, some need to be used with caution in older people.
- **Multiple meds:** As we age and require meds for additional problems, the risk of potentially dangerous drug interactions increases. HIV meds can affect—and are affected by—treatments for other health conditions, leading to raised or lowered med levels in the bloodstream. This can prevent some meds from working correctly or increase the risk of serious side effects. And older people may be more susceptible to drug interactions, as their livers and kidneys—responsible for breaking down medications—begin to decline. Be sure your health care provider keeps close tabs on all meds you're taking, including over-the-counter remedies and supplements.

QUICK TIPS

Growing older with HIV means getting wiser to age-related health challenges.

■ BEYOND VIRAL LOAD

Keeping on top of your HIV is important, but routine health exams are also necessary, especially as we age. Talk with your doc about other lab tests you need to monitor your health.

■ BODY TALK

Aging gracefully involves more than seeing your doctor and taking meds. It means life-affirming acts such as quitting cigarettes, alcohol and drug use; eating a healthy diet; getting regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight.

■ MIND MATTERS

Some studies show that engaging in mental activities like solving crosswords and number puzzles every day can guard against mental deterioration.

■ FRIENDLY ADVICE

Studies show that people who maintain active social networks of friends and family live longer and happier lives than people who are isolated.

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