



HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY
CAYMAN ISLANDS
Caring People. Quality Service.

MANAGING YOUR HEALTH

A Comprehensive
Resource & Guide for
Living with HIV

© Cayman Islands Health Services Authority | Box
915, Grand Cayman KY1-1103 | Cayman Islands

- A comprehensive guide to health and wellness for both the recently diagnosed and the long-term HIV patient.
- Learn the first steps that you need to take following a positive diagnosis
- Find out how you can take a proactive approach to lasting health and wellness
- Navigate the healthcare system, social services and mental health resources
- Protect your partners, community and loved ones

Introduction

If you are receiving this guide following a recent HIV diagnosis, the first thing that you need to know that you're in good hands. The HSA has been a leader in treating HIV and the Cayman Islands has led the region in access to treatment, care and services for decades.

It's perfectly natural to feel overwhelmed immediately following your diagnosis; anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation are common in the first weeks and it's also not uncommon to need medical help just to cope with the shock of your diagnosis. Be sure to discuss your emotional, mental health or substance abuse challenges with your HIV Programme Coordinator or primary care physician during this initial stage.

Dealing with HIV in the early stages is as much an exercise in managing stress and dealing with emotions as it is protecting and managing your physical health. You might want to consider reaching out to someone you trust to not only disclose your HIV status but ask for help and support. This could be a relative, close friend, counselor or clergy member.

USEFUL ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ARV Anti Retro Viral

CIG Cayman Islands Government

HIV Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HSA Health Services Authority

HPV Human Papillomavirus

MSM Men who have sex with Men

PLWHIV Persons Living with HIV

PREP Pre Exposure Prophylaxis

The First Weeks Following Your Diagnosis

There's no doubt that a positive HIV diagnosis is a life changing event. In these early stages you can expect to experience any combination of emotions: fear, anger, shame, denial or depression. While this is natural it can't get in the way of taking responsibility to manage your health.

It's important to meet with the relevant HSA staff as early as possible, including the HIV Programme Coordinator and your primary care physician. Lab work, blood tests and a physical will be scheduled to assess your health and you will be advised about antiretroviral medication (ARV). This is a big step and the most important step that you can do to stay healthy is to follow the prescribing instructions and ensure that you take your medication exactly as prescribed.

[It's especially important to cultivate a mindset of optimism. Research has shown that patients who take active roles in their wellness, strive to be socially active and cultivate friendships have just about the same life expectancies as those without HIV. Don't isolate yourself.]

Managing Your Health

It's our priority at the HSA to keep you healthy and ensure that everyone involved takes a proactive role before you should ever get sick. Be sure to stay in touch with us, notify us of changes of contact info and get in touch if you feel unwell or notice symptoms that concern you. If you have been prescribed ARV medication your doctor will discuss with you the side effects that these can cause. While some medications may make you feel unwell, this usually dissipates in the first 1-3 months after commencing treatment. Do not ever stop taking your medication without speaking to us.

Common Problems

Alcohol

Drinking can greatly hinder your long term health. Not only can you forget to take your medications when under the influence, but the combination can make you feel much worse. Many ARV medications are also processed by the liver and heavy drinking can greatly hinder your physical health. Talk to us if you need help managing or coping with your drinking

Drugs

Drugs, especially cocaine can counteract the effects of several ARV medications. Discuss your drug use with the HIV Programme Coordinator. Rest assured this is completely confidential and nothing you say to the coordinator or your doctor is discussed with third parties.

Mental Health

A variety of mental health services and counseling are all readily accessible. Reach out to us if you feel that you may benefit from any of these services.

Treatment

The advent of antiretroviral treatments (ARV) in the early 1990's was a pivotal change in how HIV is addressed and treated around the world. Treatment has saved and/or improved the lives of countless carriers of HIV. Prospects and prognoses have continued to improve over the past two decades and today's HIV medications are well tolerated, safe and the regimen that you will be discussing with your medical team here at the HSA usually involves one or two pills daily. The most important step that you can take to ensure that treatment works optimally for you is to take your meds daily, at the same time every day and exactly as prescribed. We refer to this practice as adherence.

It's of the utmost importance that you take your HIV medication exactly as prescribed and instructed. Failure to do this will cause your CD4 count to decrease and viral load to increase and missing doses can also make the virus resistant in your body, rendering the medications ineffective. If you need help maintaining your treatment schedule, be sure to speak to the HIV Programme Coordinator.

A Word about Supplements

While a good multivitamin is a good idea, be sure to discuss anything else that you take, including vitamins, natural treatments and alternative therapies. Some natural products like St. John's Wort counteract ARV medication and should not be taken under any circumstances.

Protecting yourself and Others

If you are sexually active — or if you still inject IV drugs — think about how to avoid passing HIV to others. HIV infection is like a chain from one person to another. You can break that chain and help others avoid infection. If you are sexually active, always wear a latex condom or polyurethane female condom during sex.

Avoid getting re-infected with HIV.

It is possible to be infected again if you are re-exposed to HIV. Re-infection makes your HIV worse and slows your treatment progress.

Avoid STDs. When you have HIV plus another STD, you have more HIV in your semen or vaginal fluid. That makes it easier to pass the virus to someone else if you do not use a condom.

Remember, you can get STDs through oral sex.

If You Inject Drugs

- Use a new, sterile needle and syringe and sterile water each time you inject.
- If you reuse injection equipment ("works"), always use your own — don't share your works with other people.
- Clean your needles and syringes with bleach and water.
- Get new needles and syringes from a drugstore without a prescription.
- Get help for your addiction. The HSA can help you deal with and break this dependency.

HIV & Women's Health

It takes careful planning to ensure that you don't pass on HIV to your unborn child. Your medical team might have to adjust your medications, prescriptions and it is imperative that your baby be born by Caesarian Section

Another issue to consider are abnormal pap smears. When your body has HIV, it is easier to get other viruses. Human papilloma virus (HPV) infects cells in the cervix and causes cervical cancer. A Pap smear can find these HPV cells. If your Pap smear is abnormal, your doctor may order further tests or treatment.



**Be sure to talk with
your doctor if you are
HIV+ and pregnant,
nursing, or planning
to start a family!**

Remember!

- Successful HIV treatment today means you can expect to live a long, healthy life
- Your treatment could be as simple as taking one or two pills a day
- Once in treatment, you may only have to see a doctor once or twice a year
- Being monitored and treated lowers your risk of passing on HIV
- HIV positive parents can have HIV negative children.

Setting Long Term Goals

There is good news and the medical community is optimistic that newer, better treatment options are likely to be patented, approved and made available this decade. We know more about how the virus replicates and works in the human body than ever before. There have even been a handful of cases of patients being functionally cured of HIV. While applications for using these findings to cure everyone are still many years in the future, the onus is on you the patient to stay as healthy as possible in case that day comes this decade. Discuss your long term healthcare goals, concerns and family planning with your healthcare team. We're here to help!

Useful Phone Numbers

Pharmacy

244 2716 or 244 2717

General Practice

244 2800

HIV Programme Coordinator

244 2507