

# Nutritional Care for People Living with HIV/AIDS

Answers to  
frequently asked  
questions



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# Abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS – Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome

ARVs – Anti-retroviral Drugs

HIV – Human Immune Virus

OIs – Opportunistic Infections

PLWHA – Persons Living With HIV/AIDS

WHO – World Health Organisation



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# Introduction

People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) need correct information about food and nutrition.

Providing PLWHA with this information will help them make the best food and nutrition choices for proper HIV/AIDS management and improved quality of life.

This booklet has answers to commonly asked questions by PLWHA and caregivers. The questions are grouped into five sections:

Section 1: The link between nutrition and HIV/AIDS

Section 2: Dietary intake and food access by PLWHA

Section 3: ARVs and nutrition

Section 4: Traditional herb therapy

Section 5: Maintaining body composition



## Booklet Use

### Who should use this booklet?

Counselors, health workers, trainers, and PLWHA, their families, and other care-givers. Even people without HIV/AIDS will find this booklet useful.

### When should this booklet be used?

The booklet can be used during counselling sessions with PLWHA, or during education at different fora with PLWHA. Trainers can use it to respond to questions during training sessions.

# The link between nutrition and HIV/AIDS

## 1. What is a good nutritional status?

A good nutritional status is when the body has enough and right kinds of food to meet its requirements for proper functioning, growth, repair and maintenance of health.

How does HIV/AIDS affect the nutritional status of PLWHA?

PLWHA are vulnerable to poor nutritional status because their body's food requirements are increased yet they have poor food intake.

HIV worsens the nutritional status of a PLWHA. This is because:

- HIV/AIDS increases the body's requirement for food.
- HIV/AIDS leads to opportunistic infections, which are often associated with increased body nutrition requirements and poor food intake.
- Drugs taken by PLWHA like Antiretrovirals (ARVs) are associated with side effects that may reduce food intake. Increased body nutrition requirements coupled with poor food intake will lead to a poor nutritional status.

## 2. Why is good nutrition important for PLWHA?

Good nutrition is important for the well being of a PLWHA because it:

- Strengthens the body's protection and recovery from diseases, especially in the early stages of infection. This helps to delay progression of HIV infection to AIDS.
- Promotes adequate storage and availability of the required nutrients. This is because HIV/AIDS and opportunistic infections increase the body's needs for nutrients.
- Helps maintain body weight and muscle thickness. These are important for maintaining the strength and independence of PLWHA.
- May make taking of medicines bearable and help the medicines work better.

**PLWHA should maintain a good nutritional status. They can do this by:**

- Eating a balanced diet. The diet should contain a variety of foods including energy giving foods (cereals, tubers, roots, sweet fruits, fats and oils), body building foods (legumes, meat, milk, eggs, seeds), protective foods (fruits and vegetables); and plenty of fluids.

- Exercising of muscles.
- Good food hygiene practices to prevent infections.
- Taking ARVs if prescribed by a doctor. These drugs reduce viral load. This boosts the immune system and reduces the frequency of opportunistic infections, thereby strengthening nutritional status.

### 3. In the absence of ARVs can good nutrition be sufficient for quality life of PLWHA?

Though good nutrition can help maintain and improve the quality of life of PLWHA, it is not sufficient on its own. Food helps boost and maintain immunity. However, when the viral load in the body is high, nutrition alone cannot fully replace the lost immunity. Prevention and proper treatment of HIV related infections is important to avoid weakening the nutritional status further. ARVs are vital because they reduce the viral load and the rate at which the body's immunity is destroyed.

To benefit from good nutrition, PLWHA have to:

- Regularly monitor their weight. If there is any unintended weight loss over a period of a month, they should seek help from a health worker.
- Eat a large enough quantity of food and include a variety of foods in their meals.
- Promptly seek health care for any other diseases.
- Adopt good personal, food, and water hygiene to prevent infections that can be transmitted through food/water.
- Practice a positive life style to maintain physical and emotional health. (e.g. avoid alcohol and smoking, exercise frequently, and seek psychosocial counselling if required).



Food groups	Examples of food types	Special preparation considerations
Energy giving foods <i>(Cereals, roots, bananas and tubers)</i>  <i>(Fats, oils and sugars-in small quantities)</i>	Matooke, cassava, irish potatoes, maize, sweet potatoes, yams, chappati, posho, rice, bread, millets.  Ghee, cooking oil, cooking fat, butter, (siagi), margarine, sugar, honey.	Avoid deep frying.
Body building foods <i>(Legumes and foods of animal origin)</i>	Beef, goat, milk, pork, chicken, fish, liver, kidney, beans, peas, yoghurt, simsims, groundnuts, soya beans, <i>odii, mukene, nswa, nsenene.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cook all animal products until well cooked.</li> <li>• Do not eat raw eggs.</li> </ul>
Protective foods <i>(Vegetables)</i>	<i>Nakati, dodo, jobyo, carrots, ntula, tomatoes, bbuga, ngobe, cabbage, sukuma wiki, pumpkin, pumpkin leaves, spinach, tomato.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid cutting vegetables before washing them.</li> <li>• Avoid cutting vegetables into very small pieces.</li> <li>• Cook immediately.</li> <li>• Cook for a short time.</li> <li>• Avoid adding a lot of water.</li> <li>• Eat immediately after cooking.</li> </ul>
Protective foods ( <i>fruits</i> )	Banana, pawpaw, <i>matugunda</i> , water melon, mango, guava, passion fruit, pineapple, <i>ntutunu</i> , orange, jambula, tangerine ( <i>mangada</i> ), apple, jackfruit, tomato, avocado.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash properly before eating.</li> <li>• Do not eat rotten fruits.</li> </ul>
Beverages	Fruit juice, water, tea. Alcohol should be avoided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boil drinking water and water for making fruit juice</li> <li>• Keep drinking water in a clean covered container.</li> </ul>



















- Excessive doses of some micronutrients (like vitamin A and D) can be toxic. Some people who take high doses of vitamin C get intestinal upset or kidney complications. It is advisable to adhere to the Recommended Daily Allowance.

**It is important to remember the following:**

- Supplements are not an alternative to a balanced meal. If taken, they should “supplement” the food eaten.
- Supplements do not treat HIV/AIDS. They improve the immunity of the body to fight against infections.
- Get advice from a health professional on which supplements are necessary and the required amount.
- It is not common to get toxicity or overdose of a nutrient through food intake but taking supplements may lead to overdose.
- Other means of supplementation may be recommended by a doctor if the PLWHA is severely deficient and has had infections (e.g. mal-absorption, diarrhoea, specific intolerances, severely malnourished).
- The diet supplements industry is not well regulated in many countries. What is sold may not contain what is written on the label.

# ARVs and nutrition

## 1. Should PLWHA on ARVs eat any special foods?

There are no special foods for PLWHA on ARVs. Like other PLWHA, they need to:

- Eat meals with a variety of foods: energy giving foods (carbohydrates), body building foods (proteins) and protective foods (vitamins and minerals).
- Eat more energy giving food as their bodies require more energy.
- Take a lot of clean safe water and fresh juice.

### Some ARVs may require:

- Taking with meals (e.g. Ritonavir) or before meals (e.g. Zidovudine).
- That they may be taken with more fats (e.g. Saquinavir) or with limited amount of fatty foods (e.g. Zidovudine, Efaviren).
- Avoiding some foods. Patients on Indinavir need to avoid grapefruit. Patients on Nevirapine need to avoid St Johns Wort. Those on Saquinavir should avoid garlic supplements.
- In all situations, people on ARVs are advised to avoid alcohol.

### Side effects

#### 2. What causes continuous nausea and dizziness among PLWHA?

- The nausea may be caused by the HIV/AIDS or it may be due to medicines. It is a common side-effect of most ARV drugs. It can also be a side-effect of other drugs taken to treat opportunistic infections.

If it is associated with the drug, nausea normally diminishes in 2 to 6 weeks.

See a health worker if the symptoms continue after 8 weeks. The health worker will find the offending medicine and may change to another drug if possible or may continue with nutritional management of the symptoms first.

#### 3. Why do some people on ARVs get terrible taste in their mouth?

- Some ARV drugs like Lamivudine and Zidovudine may lead to change in taste. This may go on for weeks.

## REMEDIES FOR CHANGE OR LOSS OF TASTE

Try to use flavour enhancers like spices and lemon or rinse the mouth with water.

### 4. Why is it that people on ARVs increase fat in different parts of the body?

- The increased fat is a side-effect of some ARVs like stavudine and lamivudine. Little can be done other than change the drug.
- Some people experience this during the start of the treatment, (e.g in the first 6 months) and then stabilise.
- However, not every increase in fat is due to ARVs. Sometimes it is due to intake of more energy (carbohydrates, fats and sugars) than the body uses.

One can try to prevent the increased fat levels by:

- Dietary management: reducing intake of fats, especially saturated fats like animal fats (ghee, butter, cream, fatty-meat), processed fats/oils, sugars and alcohol.
- Eating more fibre (fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains)
- Maintaining a healthy weight through manageable exercises (jogging and aerobics) or physical activity.

### 5. Is it true that some of the ARV drugs make people lose shape/fat on arms, legs, and face?

Yes, it is true.

- This condition is called lipodystrophy.
- Lipodystrophy seems to be associated with some drugs more than others. Drugs like ritonavir and Stavudine/d4T) have higher risk of fat loss.

- The condition could also be due to low levels of hormones like testosterone or a combination of the drug effects and low hormone levels.
- There is very little in terms of diet that can be done to “rebuild fat”. Your doctor may recommend an early shift to ARVs that are less likely to cause lipodystrophy (like abacavir and tenofovir).

# Traditional herb therapy

Most traditional herb therapies taken for HIV-related disease and symptoms have not been subjected to formal clinical research. Therefore their effect on the course of the HIV disease is unknown.

Some people report short-term benefits of some of these herbs in soothing or relieving some symptoms. Unlike herbal therapies, ARVs have a demonstrated positive effect on slowing progression of HIV.

Some herbs may:

- Have restrictions on food intake,
- Have negative effects in the body,
- Interfere with the effectiveness of drugs one may be taking.

There is nothing wrong with using alternative therapies if:

- i. They are used to supplement rather than replace standard therapy.
- ii. They are not poisonous and do not overburden your system, e.g. liver or the kidney.
- iii. There are no significant negative interactions with other medications.
- iv. They have the potential to prevent, alleviate and/or cure symptoms (e.g. lower blood pressure, increase energy, improve digestion, reduce severity of diarrhoea, etc).
- v. They are provided by a qualified traditional medicine/ alternative medicine practitioner with adequate training background, and preferably registered and certified.
- vi. The medical doctor is continuously informed of what one is taking.

Unfortunately, there is no good information on the toxicity of herbal remedies or their interactions with other medicines.

Therefore a PLWHA should realise that taking herbal therapies may involve some risk.

### 1. Should garlic be recommended for PLWHA?

- Garlic has been found to have ingredients that have antibacterial, antiviral, and anti-fungal functions, particularly in the gut, lungs, throat and mouth. Thus garlic may have some health benefits for PLWHA, but there is no clear medical evidence on this.

- Garlic has been used to manage high fat and bad fat levels in the blood. It may be useful for patients with mild hypertension, and for reducing lipids and fat deposits in the body.
- Garlic helps in improving digestion. It can be useful for patients with digestion problems.

It can be added to food when cooking, in drinks, salad or eaten raw. However, taking too much garlic may cause nausea or vomiting. It is recommended to take not more than 6 gloves per day especially when eaten raw.

#### REMEMBER:

People on the ARV saquinavir should avoid garlic supplements or too much garlic. It reduces the effectiveness of saquinavir.

### 2. Does Moringa have any nutritional value to PLWHA?

- Moringa is rich in some nutrients like vitamin A (beta carotene), calcium and iron. It may be a good source for these nutrients.
- Traditionally it is said to have antibiotic activity, and used to treat different illnesses. Compounds in its leaves and seeds are also said to have purifying effect on water.

Moringa is usually added to food or drinks (like tea).

Studies on its effect on immunity and use for HIV/AIDS are ongoing. Currently there is no evidence of its medical benefits to PLWHA.

### 3. Should PLWHA drink aloe-vera?

Aloe-vera has been used for medicinal purpose for years. The plant is said to have antibiotic properties and also strengthens the body's ability to fight infections.

Traditionally it has been used in the healing of minor wounds and burns.

However, studies are ongoing to assess the benefits of the plant among PLWHA.

#### 4. Are mushrooms recommended for PLWHA?

- Yes PLWHA can eat mushrooms as part of their daily food. They provide some minerals and vitamins.

Mushrooms are useful for maintaining good health. They may be part of a meal for PLWHA. However, some mushrooms are known to be poisonous. Get more information about edible mushrooms.

- Mushrooms have been used as traditional herbal medicines in China and Japan for thousands of years. In Asia they are commonly used for pain relief and treating diseases like arthritis.
- Mushrooms have components that are known to be anti-viral and may have the potential of treating viral infections. However, research into the field is in early stages. Currently there is no evidence that mushrooms have medical benefits for PLWHA.

# Maintaining body composition

## 1. Why and how do PLWHA get very thin?

Not every PLWHA loses weight. However, some PLWHA lose 10-20% of their normal weight within a very short period.

Factors that may contribute to weight loss in PLWHA include:

- The virus causes changes in the way the body uses and distributes food, especially if the viral load is high. It also causes changes in hormone levels (e.g testosterone) in the body which also may contribute to weight loss.
- Inadequate food intake, which may be due to loss of appetite, inability to swallow due to throat infections, depression, lack of food, or side effects of medication.

- Digestive system infections (diarrhoea, constipation, poor absorption) that may prevent food from being well absorbed.
- Chronic and severe infections which increase demand for foods especially energy giving foods. If this demand is not met the body breaks down fat and muscle tissue.
- Fat loss (lipodystrophy), especially on the face, arms and legs, as a side effect of ARVs (e.g. stavudine, and zidovudine).

## 2. Is it possible for a PLWHA who is losing weight to gain it?

It is possible for the majority of the PLWHA to regain weight.

However, how fast a PLWHA gains weight will depend on a number of factors. Causes of weight loss and factors preventing them from gaining weight:

- The amount and type of food one eats compared to how much the body requires and uses is a big factor.
- If one takes in more food than what is required by the body they will gain weight.
- If one takes in less food than what is required by the body they will lose weight.

## 3. How can PLWHA increase weight if they have been losing it?

They can prevent further weight loss and gain weight by:

- i. Eating meals with foods that are rich in energy (e.g. fermented products of millet, sorghum, and maize) and body building foods especially from animal sources (e.g milk, meat and eggs).

- ii. Increasing the amounts of foods eaten (especially of energy giving foods) and number of meals and snacks you have in a day.
- iii. Promptly treating infections/diseases.
- iv. Using ARVs to reduce the viral load in the body.
- vi. Doing mild exercises to help prevent further wasting of muscles.

## 5. Are there drugs that prevent weight loss and promote weight gain?

Yes, there are such drugs. These drugs:

- Facilitate build up of muscle tissue and also cause weight gain.
- Cause stimulation of appetite, resulting in one eating more food.

However, these drugs should only be used on recommendation by a medical provider and must be used with caution. They are associated with serious side effects (like nausea, joint stiffness, elevated sugar and fat in the blood).

Since most of these drugs act as artificial hormones, they may interact with other body hormones to cause deficiency levels.

For PLWHA on ARVs, advice from a medical doctor has to be sought before taking these drugs.

These drugs are expensive (cost between US\$ of 15,000-40,000 per year).

## 6. What information can you give a PLWHA who has too much weight?

Too much weight, especially if it is too high compared to the height (Body mass index higher than 30...) is harmful.

- It is associated with high levels of fat in the blood. This can lead to liver complications, increased risk of heart problems, high blood pressure and diabetes.
- For PLWHA on ARVs, high fat levels in blood can lead to hunchback development.

Therefore it is important for a PLWHA to prevent too much weight gain. The followings can help prevent weight gain:

- Eat small quantities of foods and drinks that have simple sugars or high fat contents. These include sugar cane, sweets, sodas, sweetened drinks, fatty meat, full cream milk, ghee, butter and fried food.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables, lean meat, steamed foods, vegetable oils like olive and corn oil.
- Take regular body weight measurements to detect early unhealthy weight gain.
- Do regular body exercises. They should be on average 30 min, 3 times per week.

If PLWHA are on ARVs and do not responding to dietary and exercise management, they should see a health worker. Weight gain could be due to the ARVs they are taking.

Many patients gain weight during the first year on ARVs , which in some cases makes up for weight loss due to untreated HIV.

## 7. Why do PLWHA often feel tired (general body weakness)?

This may be due to:

- HIV infection - Having the virus for a long time causes stress to the body, which makes you feel tired.
- Inadequate intake of food that weakens the body.
- Anaemia - the count of the blood red cells is low.
- Opportunistic infections, especially if one has had a variety of them in the past.
- Psychosocial causes like depression and anxiety.
- Medication side-effects.
- Hormonal changes in the body (e.g. testosterone and thyroid hormone production) caused by HIV infection.

The real cause needs to be assessed before care and support can be provided.

Good nutrition is particularly important for PLWHA. There is no single food that provides all needed nutrients to a human being, (except mother's milk for a baby for the first 6 months).

Therefore it is important for PLWHA to eat a variety of foods for improved quality of life. Eating adequate amounts of balanced meals taken at least 3 times a day and snacks in between meals is necessary for good health and nutritional status of PLWHA.

# Glossary

Absorption of food- Body process of taking in food through intestines

Antiretroviral – Drugs that reduce multiplication of HIV in the body

Anti-toxidants – Substances that remove poisonous substances in the body

Bacteria- Germs

Boost – To enhance

Chronic diseases- Diseases that last for a long time

Dietary – Anything that relates to diet or food consumed

Digestion – The process by which food is broken down to allow easy uptake and utilisation from the intestines by the body

Dehydration - Lack of fluids in the body

Enzymes – A chemical substance that occurs naturally in the body to speed up processes necessary for functioning of cells in the body

Exotic eggs – Eggs from chickens that are not local

Haemoglobin – Red substance found in red blood cells, which carries oxygen and contains iron

Immunity – Body's natural resistance to infections

Indigestion – The body's failure to break down food

Metabolism – Chemical processes in the body that are necessary for functioning of the body

Nutrition – The process involved in taking in food and utilising it in the body.

Opportunistic infections – Other infections that affect people living with HIV due to weakened body immunity

Re- hydration – The process of adding fluids in the body

Therapy - Treatment

Toxicity – The degree of poisonous substances in the body

Viral load- The amount of HIV in the body per unit of blood

Vegetarian – Person who does not eat meat

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