



FACT SHEET:

Nutrition

HIV also needs food as treatment

Before doctors in the USA recognised AIDS as a disease, ordinary people had already identified it in Uganda. They called it “slimming disease”. In isiXhosa it is called isifo ugawulayo. This means your body gets smaller and smaller like a piece of wood that is being chopped into small pieces. Many symptoms come with HIV. Losing weight is a central part of the disease process of HIV infection. HIV is already inside the body long before you start losing weight. The treatment is anti-retroviral medicines and good nutrition. Eating healthy is important with all diseases. With HIV this is even more so.

Make eating an enjoyable event

Many people living with HIV are badly informed about nutrition. They have been told, “do not eat this or don’t eat too much of that”. To wonder the whole time whether you are eating the right thing is not good. You can get insecure, get doubts or even feelings of guilt. Eating should be an enjoyable relaxed event.

Prevent losing important muscle weight

People living with HIV mainly lose muscle weight. The shrinking of the muscles is not noticed for a long time, because the fat around the muscles is not lost. This hides the loss of the muscle weight. Muscles

are made up of a chemical called protein. Thus it is important that you eat protein foods such as meat.

Eat lots of energy foods to prevent wasting

Since your body has to fight the HIV virus as well as other infections, it needs more energy. It is cheaper to eat lots of staple foods like pap than to eat lots of meat, which is expensive. Food many people eat every day like pap, bread, rice, potato and mngqusho contain lots of energy. These foods and fats and oils provide chemicals called complex sugars. Complex sugars provide energy to the body. When your body runs out of these energy rich foods it will use energy stored in your body. Before you were infected with HIV your body would use up stored fat when it needed extra energy. The HIV virus changes this. Your body will now use up protein (stored in muscle) to get extra energy. If you do not eat enough, you will now lose muscle and not fat. This is called wasting. Provided you eat enough energy foods regularly this will not happen. You will prevent your body from losing protein, which is easier than having to top up.

HIV causes poor nutrition. Poor nutrition makes HIV worse.

A vicious circle.

HIV lives in your immune system and weakens it. HIV also reduces absorption of food, which weakens the body’s ability to resist all kinds of diseases. Poorly nourished people are much more likely to get severe diarrhoea, TB and other infections. Good food helps prevent disease, and also helps the sick body to fight diseases and recover. Don’t stop eating when you get sick. Women

who are pregnant or breastfeeding also need more foods.

Eat lots of fruit and vegetables

The white blood cells of the immune system are made up of protein. They also need vitamins to function well. Your body gets vitamins from fruit, vegetables and meat.

What matters most is that you eat enough

You can eat more if you eat the food you like. Eat the foods you have always eaten. Expensive foods are not better than cheap foods. Often expensive food has been processed a lot in factories, which makes it lose nutritional value. You cannot always believe advertising that says a product is very nutritious. For instance, a plate of soft porridge with a teaspoon of cooking oil is much more nutritious than a plate of cornflakes.

Eat at least three meals a day

Eat three meals a day. It is good if one meal includes some protein (soya, beans, lentils, eggs, fish, chicken, meat, liver, offal, etc.). Try to eat some snack like fruit, nuts, sour milk, mageu or left-over food in between.

Drinking alcohol and smoking should be discouraged

Alcohol like beer, wine and spirits provide some sugars, but no real nutrition. It also makes you eat less. Alcohol weakens the immune system. Alcohol speeds up reproduction of the HIV germ. Thus alcohol is bad for the health of people living with HIV. Smokers get more chest infections and would often smoke a cigarette instead of taking a snack.

Eating a balanced diet

All foods fall into one of the following three groups:

Body-building foods (protein):

beans, soya, peanuts, eggs, meat, fish, chicken.

Energy-giving foods:

maize, millet, rice, potatoes, sugar, oils and fats.

Foods with vitamins that

protect against infections:

fruit and vegetables.

Try to eat food from each of these groups every day. This ensures a balanced diet. Also remember to eat three to five times a day.

People living with HIV find it difficult to eat enough

Here are some reasons why HIV positive people eat too little. Knowing about these reasons means you can overcome them.

Too little food eaten

You might be too tired or depressed to cook or to go shopping. There might also be no money. You could decide to drink alcohol to forget about HIV instead of eating well. You might have loss of appetite or feel like vomiting. Food often does not taste good when you are sick. You might have a toothache or have sores in the mouth. Thrush infection can make it painful to swallow. Your liver might be swollen, causing it to press on the stomach. This makes it difficult to eat big meals.

Too little food absorbed from the intestines

Once food has been eaten, it is absorbed from the intestines into the blood. This process can be disturbed in people living with HIV. The HIV germs do not live in white blood cells only. They also

live in the cells of the intestines. HIV damages these cells and reduces absorption of foods. HIV germs also reduce a chemical in the intestine, which helps to absorb milk products. This can lead to a bloated feeling or diarrhoea after eating milk products, called lactose intolerance. Other germs can also infect the intestines causing diarrhoea. This reduces absorption, because the food moves through the intestines too fast and because the intestine cells are damaged. Some Antibiotic medicines used to treat infections also kill good bacteria in the intestine that help absorb some foods. Taking too many antibiotics can cause diarrhoea and poor absorption. Worms can reduce absorption and can cause bleeding which leads to lack of iron. Poor nutrition itself damages the cells of the intestines, causing a vicious circle:

Poor nutrition - poor absorption

Using absorbed foods badly

Sick people need more food, because their metabolic rate goes up. TB especially causes quick loss of weight. The HIV germs also change the way the body uses foods. When running out of energy, instead of using fats, it uses proteins. This causes the hidden loss of muscles.

General hints for people who have trouble eating or maintaining their weight and strength

- Eat the foods you like eating. Eat the same foods you have always eaten.
- Make meals sociable events. Eat with your friends and family.
- Take your time when eating and relax.
- Eat small amounts often. Eat with your fingers when you feel weak.
- Mix vegetable oil, margarine or peanut butter into porridge.
- Eat cooked vegetables. They are

easier to eat than raw vegetables.

- Liquid and soft foods (mageu, amasi) are easier to swallow.
- If you have diarrhoea, continue to eat foods that do not irritate you.
- Drink plenty of water, especially when you have diarrhoea.
- Take vitamin tablets.
- Go to a clinic for advice and medications for specific problems.



Remember:

- Eating right helps the body resist sickness.
- Eating right helps the sick get well.
- The same foods that are good for you when you are healthy are good for you when you are sick.
- During and after any sickness, it is very important to eat nutritious food.