

Positively Healthy

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by Darryl Olive

We know that everyone can benefit from optimal nutrition, exercise and mind-body therapy. But if someone is HIV-positive, optimizing these three areas can increase the effectiveness of the immune system, which has the potential to limit the damage that HIV can cause in the long run. Although anti-retroviral drugs have lowered the mortality rate from HIV, they can cause a variety of side effects, such as poor levels of blood fats, increased abdominal fat and insulin resistance, all of which are risk factors for coronary artery disease.

A friend of mine and former co-worker, John Smith (not his real name), has been positive for 18 years. Now at age 45, he has empowered himself through personal transformation and "healing from the inside out," changing his diet, exercise and spiritual approach to life. His viral load is undetectable and he has a CD4 T-cell count of 550 (considered asymptomatic). His doctor still monitors his live enzymes, cholesterol and blood fat levels about every three months.

Before he knew his HIV status, he had no formal approach to his health. He often had up to 40 alcoholic beverages per week, ran and worked out sporadically, and suffered bouts of clinical depression.



Nutrition

When you are infected with HIV, your immune system works overtime to fight infections, which leads to increased metabolism in many. This means you have to eat more to maintain lean mass, perhaps 200-500 extra calories per day. This can be achieved by eating protein-rich foods that preserve and repair muscle, such as meats, beans, dairy, nuts and legumes. Drinking enough water is also crucial when you have HIV to help flush toxins and medication byproducts.

One of the first things John did was cut out alcohol, as it tends to dehydrate the body and can affect immune response and medication compliance. One study showed that taking a multivitamin can increase CD4 T-cell counts and reduce viral load. Besides taking a multivitamin, John takes papaya enzyme to aid with digestion and Tri-Flex (a glucosamine, chondroitin and MSM product) for joint health to ward off joint pain, a side effect of medication.

John also used exercise to maintain a healthy appetite. His nutrition program now focuses on eating smaller meals, reduced carbohydrates such as bread and pasta because of diabetes and balanced meals with six to eight ounces of lean meat at major meals. When he does eat carbohydrates, he prefers fruits and whole grains high in fiber, which have a small effect on blood sugar levels.

Mind-Body/Traditional Medicine

Mind-body medicine focuses on the interactions among the brain, mind, body and behavior, and on the powerful ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual and behavioral factors can directly affect health. Useful mind-body techniques for HIV include meditation and yoga.

The physiological and psychological effects of meditation have been evaluated in over 300 studies. Most of the studies have been conducted in healthy participants; nevertheless, a meta-analysis indicated that the most consistent and strongest physiological effects of meditation practices are a reduction of heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol.

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, report that the practice of Mindfulness Meditation stopped the decline of CD4 T-cells in HIV-positive patients suffering from stress, slowing the progression of the disease. Mindfulness Meditation encourages people to focus their minds and

attention on their bodies, their breathing and their immediate environment in the present moment and to avoid thinking about the past or the future. The practice has been proposed as a useful intervention for people with other life-threatening illnesses, including heart disease and cancer.

John was introduced to meditation and Eastern philosophy in college. He has since continued to connect with his inner self and search for spiritual significance through visualization and candle-gazing (tratakam) meditations, a technique from yoga that promotes mental clarity and the balance of subtle energy flows in the body, restoring health and equilibrium.

In all, yoga postures, breathing and meditation can help reduce stress hormones and circulation to the lymphatic system, which circulates disease-fighting white blood cells. Yoga can also combat depression and help reduce poor lifestyle choices. A research study at the Osher Center for Integrated Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, found that after three months of yoga and meditation, HIV patients had lower viral loads, higher CD4 T-cell counts, less stress and anxiety, and improvements in mood.

In addition to yoga and meditation, traditional medical systems like Ayurveda of India and traditional Chinese medicine offer valuable complementary and adjunct therapy modalities like acupuncture, acupressure massage and natural herbal remedies to support immunity and relaxation. John has used acupuncture once per week for the last 17 years.

Exercise

People living with HIV should always consult their physician before beginning an exercise program or increasing their level of physical activity. A physician can offer advice on HIV-related medical conditions and side effects of medications that might affect one's ability to exercise. Exercise prescriptions may vary depending on clinical status and exercise capacity, so no two programs may be the same.

In general, programs should consist of strength, cardio-respiratory and flexibility exercises.

Resistance, or strength, training is the most important pillar for someone with HIV, as it helps increase lean body mass and prevents muscle wasting. Resistance training should incorporate 8 to 10 exercises training the major muscles of the body up to three days per week on alternating days. Asymptomatic individuals should complete one set of 8 to 12 repetitions, while symptomatic individuals (CD4 T-cell count range 200-500) and those with AIDS should complete one set of 12 to 15 repetitions.

John now does, on average, four resistance-training sessions per week and even worked with a personal trainer for several years before becoming a personal trainer himself. Resistance training is not only a great way to build mass and reduce stress, but also it can provide psychological benefits of improved body image. He suggests that you listen to your body and start slowly.

Cardiovascular training reduces risk factors for coronary artery disease by helping to control blood pressure, blood sugar, blood lipids and stress, but overtraining can have negative effects on a person with HIV, such as the loss of lean body mass and suppression of immune responses. Asymptomatic individuals can do cardio training 3 to 5 times per week, up to 20 minutes at a moderate intensity. Symptomatic individuals should limit cardio training to 15 minutes, 3-4 times per week at a low to moderate intensity. Those with AIDS should limit training to 15 minutes, three times per week or as capable.

Establishing an optimal nutrition, exercise and mind-body program can improve the quality of life for those living with HIV, enhance psychological well-being and reduce risk factors for further disease complications.

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