

NUTRITION

It does matter what you eat when you have HIV

Make sure you are giving your body the extra nourishment it needs, writes SONA PARMAR

Monday was World Aids Day and for many of us, it used to be just another day. But with one in 10 Kenyans now living with HIV and Aids, the chances that a family member is infected are pretty high. This makes World Aids Day a very good time for reflection.

The nutritional aspect of HIV and Aids has been ignored for a long time as most of the attention focused mainly on drugs. In fact, for the last 100 years, medicine has focused on drugs – they are designed to destroy the ‘invader’ whether they’re antibiotics, anti-viral agents or chemotherapy.

But what if, in addition to your morning cocktail of drugs, you also tackled the problem from the other side, thereby bolstering your immune system so your body is more able to fight back against the ravages of disease? That is what optimum nutrition can do and in fact, for my patients it makes the difference between symptom-free HIV

infection and full-blown Aids.

Staying nutritionally fit is hard for all of us, but when you are living with HIV it is even more challenging. Not only do you not feel like eating, when you do eat, you’re less likely to absorb the goodness from your food. Furthermore, the nutrients that you do manage to glean are often used up in what are known as secondary or opportunistic infections. The result? You need even more nutrients – and if you don’t get them, you’re likely to hinder your immune function thereby potentially aggravating the progression of HIV.

The basics of an immune-boosting diet are simple: eat more protein, get in the right fats, feast on a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, and drink plenty of water. The protein works by helping your body to fight the illness (you’re likely to feel tired if you don’t get enough). It also helps to prevent wasting or cachexia (when a person loses weight

and muscle mass). Good sources of protein include chicken, fish and eggs.

The ‘right fats’ refer to essential fats such as those found in nuts, seeds and oily fish. At the same time, you want to cut down on animal-derived saturated fats as well as the chemically altered hydrogenated kind. And all this while avoiding anti-nutrients such as cigarettes, alcohol, caffeinated drinks and/or refined sugar. It’s simply not possible to continue consuming these things and successfully deal with HIV and Aids.

As far as supplements are concerned, swallowing handfuls of pills will not make up for a poor diet whether or not you’re HIV-positive. Nevertheless, a person’s immune strength is totally dependent on ‘optimal’ intake of vitamins and minerals, making supplementation crucial (especially because the nutritional needs of people living with HIV are higher). To help your immune system better withstand the daily assault from HIV, a

good high-strength multi-vitamin and mineral supplement is the best option.

Finally, a word about exercise (though strictly speaking this is not nutritional advice) – yes, it is important, but only if it’s the ‘gentle’ kind. Strenuous exercise generally suppresses the immune system as it uses up much-needed vitamin and mineral stores. However, gentler forms of exercise such as yoga and the Chinese art of t’ai chi actually increase T-cell counts (T-cells are a type of immune cell). Meditation has also been shown to increase T-cell counts.

The key thing to remember is that people don’t die of Aids; they die of opportunistic infections. By changing your lifestyle to include a well-balanced diet and nutritional supplements, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t be symptom-free.

The writer is a clinical nutritionist. Send your questions on family nutrition to: living@nutritionbysona.com

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