

because you asked

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HIV/AIDS at work

I'm starting a new job. Do I have to tell my employer I'm HIV positive?

Dr. Thomas replies: The bottom line is that, by law, people don't have to disclose their HIV status at work, either when they're seeking employment or during the course of employment. In Quebec at least, only doctors who are themselves HIV positive have any obligation to report their HIV positive status, and even then, it's not to their employer but to an independent committee. We know that the risk of transmitting HIV at work is infinitesimal.

Some people are very comfortable disclosing their status, but legally nobody has to. I always advise people that, whether at work or elsewhere, always be sure that you absolutely trust the people you're talking to, especially when you just find out you're seropositive.

Many more employers have employees infected with HIV and it's becoming ever more important for them to design and publicize company AIDS policies. The *Coalition des organismes communautaires Québécois contre le SIDA* (COCO-SIDA) designed a model policy for companies to use, which can be found at www.cocqsida.com.

Foot pain on ARVs

I've been having severe pain in my feet and toes since starting ARV therapy. What's causing this and what can I do about it?

Dr. Kovacs replies: Pain in the feet and toes can be caused by local damage to the nerves (peripheral neuropathy), local damage to the muscles (myopathy or myositis), damage to the spine itself or by diabetes, infection or reactions to certain medications, such as lipid-lowering drugs.

Peripheral neuropathy can significantly reduce your quality of life. Although the exact cause remains unknown, it's more commonly associated with certain ARV medications ("D" drugs: DDI, D4T, DDC). Nerve damage can also result from HIV itself, though this cause appears to be declining with the successful use of ARV therapy.

Peripheral neuropathy can often be cured if it's caught early, and can usually be relieved if it seems permanent. Stopping the offending medication, if done

early, will in most cases stop the damage but needs to be done in consultation with your doctor, as this drug may need to be replaced with another one to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of your ARV regimen. Drugs like amitriptyline (Elavil®) and nortriptyline (Aventyl®) may be beneficial for chronic pain from nerve damage. A newer medication, neurontin (Gabapentin®), has been successful in relieving nerve pain in some people.

Some medications like topical lidocaine gel and mexiletene have produced mixed results. Recent reports have not been able to conclusively show benefit from agents such as NAC (n-acetylcarnitine), carnitor, alpha-lipoic acid and mega-vitamins. Some people have had good results with acupuncture and massage therapy. If the damage has been progressing over a long period of time, it may be that no therapy that will be entirely successful.

Vitamins and supplements

Sometimes I don't eat as well as I should. Are there vitamins or supplements I should be taking?

Ms. Johansen replies: Any discussion about nutrient supplements should start with the adage "food first." Vitamin pills certainly may be warranted, but food is our sustenance, providing many health-promoting, immune-protecting substances that cannot be obtained from a pill. These include proteins, carbohydrates, essential fats, flavanoids and phytochemicals. A missed meal is a missed opportunity to nourish the body, support the immune system and feed lean body mass.

In some malnourished populations, studies show evidence that taking a daily multivitamin may slow HIV progression and protect the immune system. It's probably a good idea for all people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) to take a broad spectrum multivitamin with minerals. Guidelines for other nutrients are less clear. Given the recent evidence that PLWHAs may be at risk for osteoporosis, it's prudent to ensure that you meet the daily recommended intake of 1000 mg calcium and 400 IU vitamin D. Some centres recommend antioxidants, vitamins C and E and selenium in particular. Antioxidants from food are thought to provide significant health benefits and no risks. The case for supplementation is much weaker. The most important thing to remember when taking supplements is 'do no harm.' Upper tolerable limits have been set for most vitamins and minerals and you should stay within these limits. **R**