

# Recovering from an AIDS-related illness

Drs. Nirvair Levitt and Marianne Harris

Untreated HIV can damage the immune system to the point that your body's defences are too weak to fight off infections caused by organisms that don't normally cause illness. These diseases are called "opportunistic infections" (because they take advantage of a weakened immune system) and when you get one, you're considered to have moved from having HIV infection to having AIDS. A large number of infections are considered "AIDS-defining". Some of the common ones, especially before the availability of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), are:

- **Pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP)** — a lung infection, characterized by dry cough and shortness of breath
- **Cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis** — an eye infection that can cause blindness
- **Toxoplasmosis** — an infection in the brain that can cause headache, altered mental status, and seizures
- **Cryptococcal meningitis** — an infection causing swelling of the membranes around the brain and spinal cord, producing fever, severe headache, stiff neck, blurred vision, and confusion
- **Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC)** — an infection throughout the body, causing fatigue, weakness, night sweats, weight loss, and abdominal pain

## From HIV to AIDS and back again

Notably, this transition from HIV to AIDS is less important than it used to be. This is because in the past, once the number of your CD4 cells (the immune system cells which are damaged by HIV) fell to the level that made you susceptible to opportunistic infections, it wouldn't recover and you'd likely get one infection after another. Today, even people who have a very low CD4 cell count can see it increase substantially, often back to a normal range, once they get on treatment with HAART. Thus an AIDS-defining illness isn't the death sentence it used to be.

## Recovering from an AIDS-related infection

Many AIDS-related infections can be serious and incapacitating, often requiring a stay in hospital for treatment. Recovering from such an illness can be a long, drawn out process, especially if you were weak, underweight, or chronically ill to begin with. Here are some things you can do to promote recovery:

**Dr. Nirvair Levitt, MD, CCFP** is a family doctor at the Raven Song Community Health Centre in Vancouver and Assistant Professor of Family and Community Medicine at the University of British Columbia.

**Dr. Marianne Harris, CCFP**, is a family doctor who currently works with the AIDS Research Program at the Immunodeficiency Clinic in St. Paul's Hospital, Vancouver.



- Be patient! Get enough rest and don't try to push yourself too hard, too soon.
- Eat nutritious foods. You may have little appetite at first, so start with light foods such as soup and toast, and eat small frequent snacks throughout the day rather than trying to tackle large meals. Be sure to stay hydrated by drinking lots of fluids. Try to get some calories in your fluids by drinking juice, milk, milkshakes or nutritional supplements (e.g. Boost®, Ensure®).
- Follow the instructions of your doctor and other health care professionals. If you were sent home from hospital with a prescription, finish it all as instructed, even if you feel your symptoms have cleared up. It can take several weeks of antibiotic treatment for these infections to resolve completely, and if you stop treatment too soon the infection can come back. Keep follow-up appointments with your doctor after you're discharged from hospital and tell him or her about any ongoing symptoms.
- Try not to be too traumatized by that "AIDS" label — if you're able to take HAART, chances of full recovery are good. However if you're having difficulty coping with your diagnosis or are feeling depressed, ask for a referral to a counsellor.

Once you've recovered, you'll want to prevent other AIDS-related infections in the future. Organisms such as PCP and MAC are everywhere and there's really not much you can do to avoid them. Use normal precautions such as frequent hand-washing to avoid new infections. In some cases, your doctor may prescribe an ongoing preventive treatment, or prophylaxis, to prevent recurrences. However, the best defence is a strong immune system, which can be achieved by working with your doctor to get on and stick with a HAART regimen. **R**