

# HIV & CANCER

**As the HIV population ages there is an increasing risk of added health conditions such as cancer, this makes regular health monitoring for PLHIV (people living with HIV) even more important.**

Some men have routine health checks for prostate cancer and women for breast and cervical cancer, however PLHIV need to also check for other cancers which are now becoming more common.

The outlook for many cancers is improving constantly, however early diagnosis and reducing your risk (such as quitting smoking) can help to lessen long-term harm.

## **WHY THE INCREASE IN SOME CANCERS?<sup>1</sup>**

Cancers <sup>2</sup> including anal, vaginal, Hodgkin's lymphoma and liver are higher among PLHIV than the general population. When compared with the general population, the risk of cancer is more than double for men with HIV and approximately 50 percent greater for women with HIV.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers<sup>4</sup> have suggested that higher rates of non HIV related cancers in PLHIV could be contributed to:

- co-infection with cancer causing viruses such as HPV (human papilloma virus)
- hepatitis B or C
- weakened immune systems (nearly 80 percent of cancers)
- lifestyle factors (such as smoking).

## “If you notice any lumps or any other changes talk to your doctor and don’t be afraid to get a second opinion.”

- Peter

### HOW CAN I REDUCE MY CHANCES OF GETTING CANCER?

*There are three ways to fight cancer: early detection, treatment and a healthy lifestyle.*

While some risk factors may seem out of your control, like having a family history of cancer, you can still take action over your health and wellbeing. The first step is to talk to your doctor about your cancer risk and what you need to keep an eye on. Ask about tests and screening, even if you have no symptoms. These include:

- pap smear for cervical cancer
- anal pap smear for pre-cancerous anal lesions
- mammogram for breast cancer
- screening for bowel cancer
- prostate examination for men over 50 years of age
- oral examination by a dentist every six months
- monitoring for skin cancer.

*Know the warning signs and do self-exams.*

Check for any unusual changes to your body, such as:

- a sore or ulcer that does not heal (look for new growths on your skin or any changes in the size, colour, or shape of moles or warts)
- a lump or hardness in the skin, especially in testicles and groin area, and in women’s breasts

- sores, swelling or bleeding, white patches, scabs, or cracks inside of your mouth, lips, gums and tongue
- changes in your bowel or bladder habits
- detection of blood in your urine or stool
- a cough or a sore throat that lasts for a long time or coughing up blood
- heartburn or trouble swallowing that does not go away
- a lump in the neck, armpit or anywhere else on the body
- new moles or skin spots, or ones that have changed shape, size or colour, or that bleed
- unusual vaginal discharge or bleeding
- unexplained weight loss.

*You can lower your cancer risk and manage your HIV at the same time, by making healthy choices.*

Look at other parts of your life in order to reduce stress and improve both quality of life and general health. Lifestyle changes like reducing or avoiding alcohol intake, quitting smoking, eating and resting properly, reducing stress, as well as regular exercise can lower your risk of some cancers.

About 42.3 percent<sup>5</sup> of people with HIV smoke cigarettes. As PLHIV live longer and continue to smoke, they increase their risk of developing smoking-related cancers.

If you quit smoking, you can greatly lower your risk of cancer of the mouth, throat, lungs, stomach, kidneys, liver, pancreas, and bladder. As soon as you stop smoking, your body starts to heal and your cancer risk drops. Ask your doctor or PLWHA Victoria about treatment and peer support courses to help you quit.

*A dietitian and your doctor can help you plan a healthy diet.*

A healthy diet means eating less fatty, salty and high sugar foods. Eat more fresh fruit and vegetables, complex carbohydrates (whole grains, breads, rice, pasta, cereals, vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts and seeds), low fat foods, high-fibre foods and an adequate amount of protein. A healthy diet can lower your risk of cancer of the breast, prostate, stomach, colon, and rectum.

*Protect yourself from the sun and be aware of new growths on your skin or any changes in the size, colour, or shape of moles.*

Remember to wear sunscreen that is rated SPF30, a hat, sunglasses and clothing to protect you from the sun.

**“When you get an HIV diagnosis, there are certain things that you mentally prepare for and learn about yourself. I think that has helped in the way I dealt with cancer.”**

- Steven

*Reducing drugs or alcohol intake can improve your health and lower your chances of cancer.*

Drugs are not a direct cancer risk, but they can damage your immune system and make it harder to stay healthy with HIV. Reducing your alcohol intake can lower your risk of mouth, throat, liver and breast cancer (in women).

*Your immune system can play an important role in the prevention of some cancers.*

Research points to the importance of keeping your CD4 cell counts above 250 with ARV (antiretroviral) to keep your immune system strong. A strong immune system is your best protection against many types of cancer.

*Protect yourself from other viruses like hepatitis A, B and C.*

Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B if testing shows no evidence of previous infection and/or protection, and test for hepatitis C. Hepatitis C can be more serious and progress faster in PLHIV, so testing and regular monitoring (if you have it) are important. Protecting yourself from viruses like hepatitis A, B and C will not only protect your liver from damage, but also lessen the risk of cancer. Hepatitis B immunisations are free for PLHIV, talk to your doctor or immunisation nurse for details.

*How can I manage a cancer diagnosis?*

For many, like Peter, cancer can be unexpected:

*Peter: Cancer comes on so quickly and you don't have time to prepare. If you notice any lumps or any other changes talk to your doctor and don't be afraid to get a second opinion. You need to be vigilant and trust your instincts.*

People react to their diagnosis differently. John found it difficult to take in his diagnosis immediately and got the support he needed from the Cancer Helpline (13 11 20):

*John: It's hard to think straight when you first hear the words 'you have cancer'. There was little time between my diagnosis and the day treatments began. I wanted someone to talk too. You build up all these questions in your head and you need answers.*

People also learn to deal with cancer in their own way through support of others, getting information and taking control of life changes. Like HIV, cancer encourages people to focus on what is important in life. One approach to managing cancer is to decide first what your priorities are.

**“I needed to develop reasons to carry on living. For me, that was finding a job I really wanted to do. Now I teach kindergarten kids.”**

- Ben

A priority for Ben was to set up short term and long term goals that gave him the motivation to live:

*Ben: I needed to develop reasons to carry on living. For me, that was finding a job I really wanted to do. Now I teach kindergarten kids. Because I'm not doing it five days a week, I have the energy to put myself into it. I'm now living the life I really want to live rather than plodding along. I'd suddenly transformed my whole way of looking at life and everything fell into place.*

An HIV diagnosis prepared the way for Steven to deal with the challenges of cancer:

*Steven: When you get an HIV diagnosis, there are certain things that you mentally prepare for and learn about yourself. I think that has helped in the way I dealt with cancer. Our experiences make us stronger. You just have to accept it and deal with it and then move on in small steps.*

**“There was a turning point through the therapy to make a go of it and live a healthy life. Adjusting to your diagnosis may take time.” - Richard**

*Maintain your daily routine as close to normal as possible.*

Living day-to-day may be a challenge and everyday is likely to be different. Many find it useful to think about one achievable step at a time. Do as much as you can – sometimes this may be less than you are used too. Do not be hard on yourself, if you cannot achieve your goals. For Kevin, it was important to focus on what he could do:

*Kevin: I set myself tasks. I'd make my bed and sometimes it would take me a day to change the sheets or half a day to do the washing. I was always determined that I wouldn't let it beat me. I set little goals everyday and I achieved those goals even if it took me the whole day.*

For others, like Jason, work (its achievements and routines) was integral to his cancer recovery:

*Jason: I stayed at work - it was so important for me to keep my routine. The hospital staff where I had my treatment visited me at work and did my dressings. They came in three times a week. Managing my health and recovery was a struggle, but I achieved it. My focus is on 'what do I need to do to get well', not on how sick I am.*

*Identify your support networks.*

Sharing a cancer diagnosis is not easy. For many their partners, family, friends, peers and/or social workers or psychologists play a key role in coping with the difficult experience of treatment and post-treatment recovery.

Those close to you (family and friends) will be looking for ways to support you and may need direction on how to respond. Neville explains the importance of setting boundaries and limits:

*Neville: You don't have to share every detail about your diagnosis with everyone. I established an email list and sent a message asking people not to ring. I couldn't talk and repeating myself, was exhausting. So, I sent an email once a week and kept friends posted. That reassured them that you're okay. Email updates helped me tremendously and were my preferred means of communication. I managed to turn the updates into comic stories.*

As with HIV, knowing other people in a similar situation can give you ideas about how to deal with the challenges and issues you may encounter. For many, there are other priorities earlier on in diagnosis and treatment, which are about caring for self and maintaining a regime of health. For some, like Phillip, support groups become more beneficial during post-treatment recovery:

*Phillip: You are coping with medication and the dietary changes that help you to manage the side effects. Also, you are trying to include exercise in your daily routine. It's a balancing act. That can be hard if you are feeling really nauseous or have got diarrhoea. Going to a support group wasn't a consideration during the early stages of treatment. It was more beneficial during my recovery.*

Because people can experience depression and anxiety, it is important to have access to mental health care during treatment and post-treatment recovery, if needed. Talking to a counsellor helped Richard to adjust to his cancer diagnosis:

*Richard: There was a turning point through the therapy to make a go of it and live a healthy life. You have to be in the right psychological state and physically up to it. Adjusting to your diagnosis may take time. It is important to have someone to talk too.*

Support may also come in the form of financial and travel assistance or help with shopping or doing your housework (see 'Where can I get information and support?').

**“Radiotherapy was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do physically and emotionally, but it taught me that you can do it, particularly if you’ve got the right help and support.” - Neville**

*Treatment is different for each person.*

Being prepared and understanding what chemotherapy and radiation therapy are can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Talking to your oncologist, HIV doctor or nurse about how to prepare for side effects during and after treatment can be useful. With planning and support, the impact of side effects can be reduced. The Cancer Council Australia website has fact sheets on understanding treatments and managing side effects (see: [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)).

Responses to cancer treatment vary from person to person, because of this it is difficult to know how you will react. Taking one day at a time helped Roger to find his way through treatment:

*Roger: If you start to think about what you’re going to feel like on Friday and its only Monday, you’re going to talk yourself out of going for treatment. Don’t see how long you have got to go before treatment is over. Step through the days individually. Be an active participant in your treatment decisions and in your recovery journey.*

Ask questions, especially if you are unsure or unclear and feel you need more information on the aim of treatment.

- Is it to cure, control, prevent the spread of cancer or recurrence or relieve symptoms?
- Can side effects be prevented or controlled; are they temporary or permanent?
- What type of pain management is available?

Finishing treatment brought Neville a sense of achievement:

*Neville: Radiotherapy was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do physically and emotionally, but it taught me that you can do it, particularly if you’ve got the right help and support. If I’d been able to look at this process in advance, I probably would have said no.*

*Exercise can help with treatment side effects and improve your cancer recovery.*

The nutritional and physical activity needs of most people with cancer change during different phases of treatment and post-treatment recovery. Regular, moderate physical activity can help you cope with cancer and the side effects of treatment such as fatigue. Physical activity can boost your immune system improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and self esteem. It can also reduce anxiety and depression which are known to cause fatigue. Unless there are particular reasons why you should not exercise, try to do some exercise every day. This will help your body as you recover from cancer and cancer treatment.

*A dietician can help you to manage dietary changes during treatment.*

Weight loss happens during chemotherapy and radiation, because people lose their appetite and/or feel nauseated. A dietician or your doctor can help you plan a healthy diet. Jenny found a dietician can also help you cope with dietary changes that will support your treatment:

*Jenny: My nutritionist was wonderful. She not only gave me recipes for economical meals, but also an idea of what’s good to eat and how to deal with side effects. I am more aware of my diet and that’s a very positive thing because previously I didn’t treat my body well. I have changed my attitude and found a balance in my life.*

*Discuss the use of complementary therapies with your doctor.*

Complementary therapies may work alongside medical treatments and some have improved quality of life or reduced pain. There is no evidence that these therapies can cure or prevent cancer. Some of these therapies have not been tested for side effects and may interact with HIV or cancer treatments. There are many different paths to take with complementary therapies so discuss options with your doctor.

## REFERENCES

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2. Pate, P., Hanson, D L., Sullivan, P S., et al. (2008) 'Incidence of types of cancer among HIV infected persons compared with the general population in the United States, 1992-2003', *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 148 (10): 728-736.
3. American Association for Cancer Research's Seventh Annual International Conference on Frontiers in Cancer Prevention Research: Abstract A117. Presented November 18, 2008.
4. Ibid.
5. Grierson, J., Power, J., Pitts, M, et al. (2009), *HIV Futures 6: Making Positive Lives Count*, Monograph Series Number 74. The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

## WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION AND SUPPORT?

**Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20** provides information including free written material on specific cancers; support services, which may include counselling, financial assistance and accommodation for people living in regional Victoria; information on chemotherapy, surgery and radiation therapy and someone confidential and professional to talk to about what you are going through.

**Cancer Council Australia** website (with links to state and territory Cancer Councils) [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)

**People Living with HIV/AIDS Victoria** is the peak body for PLHIV, providing education, information and representation for all PLHIV in Victoria. Ph: 03 9863 8733, email: [info@plhivictoria.org.au](mailto:info@plhivictoria.org.au) or visit [www.plhivictoria.org.au](http://www.plhivictoria.org.au)

**Positive Living Centre [Victoria AIDS Council/Gay Men's Health Centre]** offers peer support groups, complementary therapies, nutritional services, emergency financial assistances, food relief, legal advice and a community support program for those affected by HIV. Ph: 03 9863 0444.

**Straight Arrows** offers peer support, information, advocacy, health promotion and a referral service for heterosexual PLHIV, their partners and families. Ph: 03 9863 9414, email: [information@straightarrows.org.au](mailto:information@straightarrows.org.au) or visit [www.straightarrows.org.au](http://www.straightarrows.org.au)

**Positive Women** a support and advocacy organisation for women with HIV, providing peer support, referrals and information. Ph: 03 9921 0860, email: [info@positivewomen.org.au](mailto:info@positivewomen.org.au) or visit [www.positivewomen.org.au](http://www.positivewomen.org.au)

**Country Awareness Network Victoria** is the peak rural body providing information, education, support and advocacy around HIV, hepatitis C and sexual health. Ph: 03 5443 8355, email: [can@can.org.au](mailto:can@can.org.au) or visit [www.can.org.au](http://www.can.org.au)

## *Multicultural & Related Services*

**Multicultural Health and Support Service** offers migrants and refugee communities, information and support on sexual health, HIV and blood-borne viruses. Ph: 03 9429 5477 or email: [enquiries@ceh.org.au](mailto:enquiries@ceh.org.au)

**HIV CALD Services [Component of HIV/AIDS state wide services of Alfred Health]** offers support for PLHIV from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Ph: 03 9076 3942 or email: [multiculturalservices@alfred.org.au](mailto:multiculturalservices@alfred.org.au)

### *Transport & Care at Home*

**Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS)** is a state government services that subsidises the travel and accommodation costs incurred by rural Victorians and if appropriate, their escorts, who have no option but to travel a long distance to receive approved medical specialist services.  
Ph: 1300 737 073 or visit [www.health.vic.gov.au/ruralhealth/vptas](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ruralhealth/vptas)

**Multipurpose Taxi Program** provides members with a 50% subsidy on taxi fares of up to \$60 per trip. Discount is also available for interstate travel for a limited number of trips.  
Ph: 1800 638 802  
or 03 9820 4360,  
visit [www.transport.vic.gov.au](http://www.transport.vic.gov.au)

**Red Cross Medical Transport** provides a free transport service to and from hospital or medical appointments for people who cannot use public transport or afford a taxi. Ph: 03 8327 7700 or visit [www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au)

**Royal District Nursing Services [HIV/AIDS Support Service]** providing nursing and healthcare support to PLHIV.  
Ph: 1300 334 455. This line operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**Meals Victoria (Victorian Meals on Wheels Association Incorporated)** Local Government is the main provider of meals on wheels in Victoria. The quickest way to find out about the service in your area is to ring your Local Council.

### *Alcohol & Other Drug Services*

**Quitline 13 QUIT** is a confidential, free telephone service providing information, support and advice for quitting smoking.  
13 7848 (13 QUIT).

**Direct Line 1800 888 236** is a free, anonymous and confidential alcohol and drug phone service. Direct Line provides 24-hour, 7 day counselling, information and referral service.

**Turning Point** provides a wide range of specialist treatment and support services to people affected by alcohol and drug use.  
Ph: 03 8413 8413,  
email: [info@turningpoint.org.au](mailto:info@turningpoint.org.au)  
or visit [www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)

### *Legal & Financial Assistance*

**Centrelink** advises on government disability, sickness and carers payments. Ph: 13 27 17  
or visit [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)  
and click on "A-Z".

**Victoria Legal Aid (VLA)** provides free legal help over the phone, by video or in person at one of their offices around Victoria. VLA also has lawyers in some courts, hospitals, prisons and detention centres. Multilingual services available.  
Ph: 03 9269 0120 or 1800 677 402 (free call for country areas),  
visit [www.legalaid.vic.gov.au](http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au)

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**Disclaimer:** This factsheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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