



Living With HIV/AIDS During *MMT*

Many patients in methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) programs are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. At one time, little was known about this infection and there were few medications to treat it. That has changed.

Today, HIV/AIDS can be effectively treated during MMT to help achieve better, more productive, and longer lives. This brochure provides a basic understanding of HIV/AIDS and offers some tips for receiving the best care possible.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for **H**uman **I**mmunodeficiency **V**irus. It destroys cells in the immune system, which normally protect the body from infections and diseases.

After being infected with HIV, it can take months before illness appears. Some people develop persistent fever, headaches, swollen lymph glands, skin rashes, sore muscles and joints, stomach upsets, and other symptoms.

Whether there are indications of infection or not, the virus grows and can be spread to others. So, it is important to be tested for HIV.

What is AIDS?

HIV can eventually cause **AIDS**, which stands for **A**cquired **I**mmune **D**eficiency **S**yndrome.

This means it is an infection coming from outside the body (acquired from HIV) that attacks the immune system causing the body's defenses to become weakened (deficient). AIDS results in a group of health problems – a syndrome.

Because the body's defenses are inadequate, patients with AIDS can develop illnesses that can be life-threatening. Even a common cold or the flu may be dangerous.

How is HIV infection treated?

Although the virus cannot be cured, there are a number of anti-HIV medications to fight its spread and damage to the immune system. Combinations of these medicines often are used; however, there currently is no way to rid the body entirely of all virus.

Another important goal of drug therapy is to prevent harm from other viruses, bacteria, and fungi that take advantage of the patient's weakened immune system; these are called "opportunistic infections." Therefore, additional medicines, such as antibiotics, may be prescribed.

Healthy living helps strengthen the immune system so it can battle HIV. A good diet, exercise, and adequate rest are important.

Can life continue normally?

HIV/AIDS is different in each patient; some become ill rather quickly after infection with HIV, while others live fairly normal lives for years.

Because HIV passes from one person to another by the exchange of body fluids – especially semen, vaginal fluids, or blood – unprotected sex and needle sharing must be avoided. Even in a patient already infected, repeated exposure to HIV can make the disease much worse. And, being treated with anti-HIV medications does not prevent spread of the virus.

However, there is no need to avoid normal daily contact with other persons and family members. As long as they are physically able, patients with HIV/AIDS can work and remain socially active.

Does methadone affect HIV/AIDS?

There is no scientific evidence that ongoing methadone maintenance treatment is harmful to patients with HIV or AIDS. Nor does methadone weaken the immune system or make the illness worse.

However, there is a potential for drug interactions between methadone and some medications used to treat HIV/AIDS. These interactions can lower levels of methadone and/or the other medications, causing them to become less effective. Or, drug levels may become too high in some cases, producing undesirable side effects.

Such interactions often can be controlled by adjusting dosages of the medications or methadone. Sometimes, alternative HIV/AIDS medicines can be substituted.

*W*hat can you do?

With proper care, HIV/AIDS can be successfully managed during MMT, providing added years of quality living. However, you must do your part to receive the best care possible, including:

- **Take all medications exactly as directed, and get help if you find the instructions difficult to follow. Never stop taking any medicines on your own.**
- **Healthcare providers need to know of your HIV/AIDS status so they can deliver proper care; for example, not prescribing medications that will interact with anti-HIV treatments or methadone.**
- **If you are sexually active, learn about and use safer sex practices to avoid spreading HIV.**
- **Let MMT clinic staff know if your methadone dose seems too high or too low, so necessary adjustments can be made.**
- **Also, let clinic staff know if you are experiencing troubling symptoms that might be due to anti-HIV medications or worsening illness.**
- **Avoid all substance abuse. It can make HIV infection worse and/or speed its progression to life-threatening AIDS.**

Bring your questions or concerns to the attention of MMT clinic staff so they can help you or refer you to the proper healthcare specialists. New treatments are constantly in development, bringing added hope to patients with HIV/AIDS.

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For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at **www.atforum.com**.

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