

Nutritional management of common opportunistic infections (HIV-context)

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The HIV virus attacks the immune system. In the early stages of the infection a person shows no visible signs of illness but later many of the signs of AIDS will become apparent, including weight loss, fever, diarrhoea and opportunistic infections (such as sore throat and tuberculosis).

Good nutritional status is very important from the time a person is infected with HIV. Nutrition education at this early stage gives the person the opportunity to adopt healthy eating habits and to take action to improve food security in the home, particularly as regards the cultivation, storage and cooking of food.

Good nutrition is also vital to help maintain the health and quality of life of the person suffering from AIDS. Infection with HIV adversely impacts on the immune system, which leads to other infections with attendant lower food intake because of reduced appetite and/or

impaired nutrient absorption leading to weight loss and malnutrition. One of the possible signs of the onset of clinical AIDS is a weight loss of about 6–7 kg for an average adult. When a person is already underweight, a further weight loss can have serious adverse effects on the health and nutritional status of the individual. A healthy and balanced diet, early treatment of infection and proper nutritional recovery after infection can improve quality of life. Additionally, the treatment of opportunistic infections in combination with the therapy for HIV may influence eating patterns and nutritional status.

When nutrient needs are not met, recovery from an illness is known to be prolonged. During this period the family will have the burden of caring for the sick person, paying for health care and absorbing the loss of earnings while the ill person is unable to work. These and other benefits derived from maintaining a good nutritional status in such individuals is therefore of paramount importance.