

HIV and Weight

The weighty issue of weight gain or loss

Many of us living with HIV experience both weight gain or weight loss at various times in our lives. Like anyone else, our weight will change over our lifetime, so it's important to consider the facts and complex factors that affect body weight.

The Facts

- The average adult, whether living with HIV or not, report some increase in weight annually. This may be [approximately ½ to 1 kilogram \(kg\) every year](#).
- Some people living with HIV have experienced significant weight gain issues. Some of these reasons may be due to HIV itself, some antiretroviral medications (ARTs), and additionally there could be a number of other factors.

Factors that [may affect body weight](#)

- Family history
- Age
- Gender
- Genetic factors including ethnicity
- Stress
- Your personal metabolism
- Certain health conditions and certain medications
- Sleep habits
- What you eat, how much water you drink and your physical activity
- Environment (where you live)
- Financial resources
- Family lifestyle and culture
- Your mental health and emotional factors such as mood
- Smoking, alcohol or other recreational drugs

The relationship between weight and HIV

Your immune system requires a lot of energy to fight infection. When HIV is left untreated, weight loss can be common because it's working to repair itself. Once HIV is treated, your body doesn't need to use as much energy. [It's common for people living with HIV to experience some weight gain when starting ARTs.](#)



There can be a number of factors that influence weight gain or loss.

Talk with your doctor about a comprehensive strategies to explore what will work for you.

Can HIV medications affect weight?

The causes for weight gain or loss are complex, and may be due to some HIV antiretroviral medications. A range of social, physical, emotional, and psychological factors may also cause or contribute to weight gain or loss. These may include stressful life changes, depression, [medications used to treat certain conditions](#) for example anti-depressants, decreased physical activity, or even normal age-related metabolic changes ('slowing down'), etc. These will differ from person to person. Weight gain has been reported as both subcutaneous (under the skin) and visceral (around the organs) as well as lean mass (muscle).

For people living with HIV, there are normally two main events that can impact on weight. These are when someone begins HIV ART medication for the first time, or when someone switches between ART medications.

When people living with HIV start ARTs for the first time:

- they are likely to gain some weight ([on average this is around 1-3kg in the first year](#)).
- this weight gain is greatest in the first year after starting ARTs and then may level off, with weight gain becoming similar to the general population (around half to 1kg each year).
- the [newer ARTs appear to be associated with higher weight gain than older treatments](#) (about 1kg more in the first year). It's not known if this is because these treatments are better tolerated and easier to take than older ARTs or if there are other reasons.
- [some people are more likely to gain weight on ARTs than others](#), for example people with low CD4 counts, women, people of colour, people over 50 years of age and people with a higher starting weight.

When people living with HIV switch between ARTs:

- recent studies have shown that [the usual increase in weight when switching ARTs is just over 1 kg per year](#), which is very similar to gains in the general population
- a switch [from older ARTs may cause a weight gain \(1-2kg\) shortly after the switch](#).
- if you change ARTs and gain some weight there is no evidence that switching back to your original ART will lead to a corresponding weight loss.
- when switching over to some of the newer ARTs, it is important to discuss your concerns about weight gain with your doctor and monitor your weight over time, along with any life events or changes that may be contributing factors to the weight gain.

Strategies and solutions to explore with your doctor

Below are some discussion points to talk about with your doctor to explore together regarding either your weight gain or loss:

- track your weight gain over time from when you start HIV ART medication, a new ART or other medication to the present and discuss this trend and issues with your doctor.
- explore what health screening there might be to rule out any underlying health condition that may be the cause of your weight gain or loss. These tests can include blood pressure, lipids, glucose and thyroid function.
- consider any other life events such as changes which may have introduced stressors or affected your mental health such as job loss, relationship changes, death in the family, etc.
- any changes to your nutrition, physical activity, smoking, medicines and supplements (including prescribed medications such as anti-depressants as well as over-the-counter (OTC) medicines that might be herbal, complementary or alternative medicines. Your doctor can review all your medicines and their interactions with other medications.
- keep a written track of questions you want to discuss with your doctor to ensure you cover everything.
- have a holistic discussion with your doctor about the various combinations of HIV antiretroviral medication to work out what treatment combinations will work best for you. HIV antiretrovirals are divided into different drug classes based on how each medication intervenes in the HIV replication life cycle. These have different effects on different people and can be as individualised as you are.
- monitor trends in your weight by regularly recording your weight over time using resources such as an exercise and food diary, smart phones, watches and other apps and review changes.
- seek referral to other specialists such as a dietician, exercise physiologist, psychologist or counsellor, community based fitness group or individual coach or instructor for advice on diet and exercise.

Weight gains discussed here are averages; some people might put on more weight, some people won't put on any weight and some people will lose weight.

For more information phone 02 9206 2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit www.positivelife.org.au

Updated September 2021