

# HIV and aging in Canada: Diagnosis, treatment and care

Ensuring timely diagnosis and providing appropriate treatment, care and support to older Canadians living with HIV present specific challenges.

## Diagnosis

Older patients are more likely than younger patients to present late for HIV diagnosis and care.<sup>1</sup> One study showed that older patients were more likely than younger patients to be given a diagnosis during hospitalization and more likely to have an AIDS diagnosis at the time HIV was diagnosed.<sup>2</sup>

Older adults are less likely to be tested for HIV because they have lower perceived risk of acquiring HIV—by both themselves and their health care providers. The assumption that older adults are not sexually active often means that—unlike what is done with younger patients—health care providers neither review the sexual histories of their older patients, nor do they provide education about safer sex practices. Since physicians are less likely to discuss HIV/AIDS and related risk factors with older patients,<sup>3</sup> they may be less likely to suspect and propose testing for HIV symptoms, delaying diagnosis. HIV/AIDS symptoms resemble those of other chronic illnesses which tend to develop in older adults. Older HIV-positive adults and their health care providers are therefore more likely to attribute HIV-related symptoms to other illnesses or to the normal aging process.<sup>4</sup>

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## Treatment

Early diagnosis of HIV is important no matter what your age; however, the older you are, the more critical early diagnosis becomes. This is because HIV progresses more quickly in older people. Both age and CD4 count at the time when treatment is started have a big impact on life expectancy. One large study found that people living with HIV and on antiretroviral therapies can live well into their 60s, even if they started therapy with severely depleted immune systems. Those who begin therapy with CD4 counts above 200 can expect to live into their 70s.<sup>5</sup>

Older people living with HIV are more likely to adhere to their drug regimen than younger populations.<sup>6, 7</sup> This leads to a better initial control of the virus in older individuals. In other words, they are more likely to achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load than younger people living with HIV. But, there may be a smaller CD4 increase (a measure of how well the immune system is recuperating from HIV infection) in comparison to younger people who are HIV-positive. Older HIV-positive people in general require two years to reach CD4 gains that younger populations see in one year.<sup>8</sup> This is probably due to older age, despite better treatment adherence.

Treating HIV can be more complicated for older people. This is because the chances of having other health problems that also require treatment, such as high blood pressure, arthritis or even cancer, also increase with age. Taking several drugs at the same time can raise the risk of drug interactions, side effects and

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toxicities. Complementary and alternative medicines may also interact with treatment for HIV and other health problems. Health care providers and older Canadians living with HIV should carefully monitor all of these medications.<sup>9</sup>

The side effects of anti-HIV drugs don't appear to occur more often in people living with HIV as they get older, but they can be made worse by the side effects of other non-HIV medications. Additionally, decreases in kidney and liver function that come naturally with age, changes in hormone levels and metabolism, as well as weight loss associated with aging can all increase the chance of an adverse drug reaction.<sup>10</sup>

## ■ Care

Appropriate care for older Canadians living with HIV must take into account not only HIV-specific physiological and psychosocial effects, but also the effects of aging and the co-morbidities that are associated with it.

As HIV-positive Canadians get older and seek services outside HIV-specific care, they may find that services are not tailored to their needs, and they may experience greater stigma. For example health care services that have traditionally been offered to older Canadians (for example home care, rehabilitation, specialists) may not be accustomed to deal with people who are HIV-positive, gay, or who have a history of drug use. The need for this type of care may also occur somewhat earlier for Canadians living with HIV than others, presenting an additional challenge to the willingness and capacity of these institutions to care for persons living with HIV.

It may be a challenge to meet the care needs of older Canadians living with HIV in this context. This may be especially true in smaller communities, with the existence and access to services likely to vary across the country. There may be a need to adapt existing care to meet the needs of older Canadians living with HIV, and to ensure additional training for a range of health care providers.

In terms of acute care and palliative care, there may be two shifts to consider. First, as Canadians are living longer with HIV, there may be a greater increase in the need for acute care compared to palliative care. Second, an increasing number of HIV-positive older Canadians might require care from non-HIV-related causes, in addition to HIV-related causes.

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<sup>1</sup> Cuzin L et al. "Immunological and clinical responses to highly active antiretroviral therapy in patients with HIV infection aged > -50 years," *Clin Infect Dis*. 2007;45(5):654-657.

<sup>2</sup> Mugavero MJ, Castellano C, Edelman D et al. "Late diagnosis of HIV infection: the role of age and sex," *Am J Med*. 2007;120(4):370-73.

<sup>3</sup> Skiest DJ, Keiser P. "Human immunodeficiency virus infection in patients older than 50 years. A survey of primary care physicians' beliefs, practices, and knowledge," *Arch Fam Med*. 1997;6:289-294.

<sup>4</sup> Siegel K, Schrimshaw EW, Dean L. "Symptom interpretation: Implications for delay in HIV testing and care among HIV-infected late middle-aged and older adults," *AIDS Care*. 1999;11:525-535

<sup>5</sup> The Antiretroviral Therapy Cohort Collaboration. "Life Expectancy of Individuals on Combination Antiretroviral Therapy in High-income Countries: A Collaborative Analysis of 14 Cohort Studies," *The Lancet*. 372 (9635) (2008): 293-99.

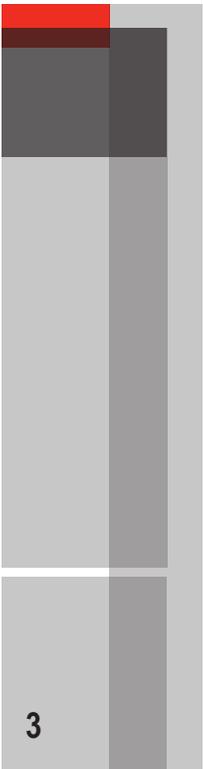
<sup>6</sup> Hinkin C et al. "Medication adherence in HIV-infected adults: effect of patient age, cognitive status, and substance abuse," *AIDS*. 2004;18 Suppl 1():S19-25.

<sup>7</sup> Mavandadi S et al. "Psychological well-being among individuals aging with HIV: the value of social relationships," *J Acquir Immune Defic Syndr*. 2009, 51(1), 91-98.

<sup>8</sup> Silverberg MJ et al. "Older age and the response to and tolerability of antiretroviral," *Arch Intern Med*. 2007;167(7):684-691.

<sup>9</sup> CATIE. *HIV and aging*. 2010 booklet. Available at [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

<sup>10</sup> CATIE. *HIV and aging*. 2010 booklet. Available at [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)



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