

# Managing your health

a guide for people living with HIV



## About CATIE

CATIE (Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange) is a national not-for-profit organization that, through knowledge exchange, works to reduce the transmission of HIV and to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV. CATIE offers a variety of information services for people living with the virus and people working in related fields. Services are offered in print, online and by phone in English and in French.

**For more details, please visit**

**[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)**

**or call 1-800-263-1638**

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### **Mission Statement**

CATIE champions and supports innovation and excellence in knowledge exchange for the prevention of HIV transmission, and the care, treatment and support of people with HIV by:

- collaborating with and building the capacity of front line organizations to use knowledge effectively to respond to the HIV epidemic;
- supporting and connecting people with HIV, other individuals, and organizations to develop, synthesize, share and apply HIV knowledge;
- acting as a central contact point for the flow of comprehensive, accurate, unbiased, timely and accessible HIV information and community-based knowledge.

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### **Disclaimer**

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.

The Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE) in good faith provides information resources to help people living with HIV/AIDS who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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# Complementary and alternative therapies

Complementary and alternative medicine is a very broad term that covers many different approaches to health and healing. It usually refers to any kind of therapy that lies outside the standard western medical model. Many people with HIV use complementary and alternative medicine along with western medical treatments, in order to get the benefits of both.

This chapter will touch on many of the major systems and strategies of complementary and alternative medicine, but it's by no means a comprehensive list. You can refer to the Resources section for more detailed information about complementary therapies that you are interested in.



## About the author

Devan Nambiar has been working in the HIV sector for 15 years and is actively involved in the HIV community regionally, nationally and internationally. He specializes in allopathic and complementary health care and has been actively studying and researching ethno-botanicals and indigenous medicines for their efficacy and use with anti-HIV drugs. He is also involved in research in ethnoracial communities.

Devan was presented with the Honour Roll Award of the Ontario AIDS Network in 2002, and in 2006 he was the recipient of the Canadian AIDS Society Leadership Award. Devan worked at CATIE for nine years as a treatment educator, and now works as a consultant with his own company, Global Health Integrative Systems.

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## COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Complementary and alternative medicine usually emphasizes the importance of linking the various dimensions of an individual, including the mental, physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual.

## What is complementary and alternative medicine?

Complementary and alternative medicine (often called CAM) is a very broad term that covers many different approaches to health and healing. In Canada, complementary and alternative medicine usually refers to any therapy outside the standard western medical model. Complementary and alternative medicine is also known by many names, such as alternative medicine, complementary therapies, integrative medicine or holistic medicine. These terms reflect the way many people living with HIV use complementary and alternative medicines—not as an alternative that rejects the benefits of western medicine, but as something that works with western medicine to provide them with the benefits of both.

Complementary and alternative medicine usually emphasizes the importance of linking the various dimensions of an individual, including the mental, physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual. Complementary and alternative medicine attempts to heal on various levels, and explore root causes instead of just dealing with symptoms. There are many complementary and alternative therapies that may help you improve and maintain your quality of life, repair immune damage or treat symptoms.

Complementary and alternative medicine takes time to bring successful results. It involves making daily effort to improve dietary intake, exercising often, practising meditation, etc. Complementary and alternative medicine is not a quick fix for ailing health.

### A word of caution

Be wary of claims that any therapy or treatment can cure AIDS, or reverse HIV status from positive to negative. Inform yourself by researching the therapy and talking with other people with HIV who have used the therapy or treatment you're interested in.

Contact your nearest AIDS service organization, or call CATIE at 1-800-263-1638 if you have questions.

## Some examples of complementary and alternative therapies

There are many different therapies and practices that are included under the term complementary and alternative medicine. Below is an alphabetical list of some of the therapies that people with HIV may benefit from. It is by no means a complete list, but it gives a sampling of some wellness strategies and approaches you may want to explore. Some of these strategies may become part of your personal health plan, and the practitioners who offer them may become members of your health team.

For more information about these and other therapies, see CATIE's *A Practical Guide to Complementary Therapies for People Living with HIV* and *A Practical Guide to Herbal Therapies for People Living with HIV*.

### **Affirmations and visualization (also called guided imagery)**

Many people with HIV believe that having a positive attitude is an important part of survival and healing. An affirmation is a statement of something you want to happen, declared in the present tense. Some examples of positive affirmations are: "I am strong and healthy" or "I love myself." Visualization or guided imagery is one way of developing positive thinking that is popular with people who have life-threatening illnesses. It involves imagining your body and your life as healthy and well. Usually, a group leader guides the process of the visualization with spoken instructions. Alternatively, you can use audiotapes or CDs that lead you through the visualization process.

### **Aromatherapy**

Aromatherapy is a branch of herbal medicine that uses the medicinal properties found in the oils of various plants. The oils are extracted from the flowers, leaves, branches or roots. The oils can be breathed in directly, added to bathwater, or warmed to produce an aroma. Aromatherapy can enhance a guided visualization or a massage.

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Medicinal herbs are used  
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### **Ayurvedic medicine**

Ayurvedic medicine is a medical system that comes from India and is more than 5,000 years old. It is the oldest recorded medical system. In Sanskrit, "ayur" means life and "veda" means knowledge or science, so Ayurveda means the science of life. Ayurvedic medicine uses natural healing methods like nutrition, herbs, exercise, massage, yoga and meditation to bring your body to a healthy state.

### **Herbal medicine**

The first medicines ever used were derived from plants. Medicinal herbs are used by many people in many cultures around the globe. Herbal medicine is also known as botanical medicine.

Herbal medicines are used by herbalists, doctors of Chinese medicine, naturopaths, homeopaths, aromatherapists and Ayurvedic doctors. If you're thinking about taking herbal treatments, it's useful to consult one of these healthcare professionals to find out which herbs are best for you and what dosages would be effective and safe. Practitioners experienced in treating HIV-positive people may also be able to warn you of possible interactions with prescription drugs you are taking. It's wise to find out about possible interactions before starting an herbal treatment.

Some herbs sold as "immune boosters" may be harmful to people with HIV. Some immune-boosting herbs may stimulate parts of your immune system that are already overactive while weakening other parts. Ask a naturopath or herbalist, or do your own reading to find out how various herbs may be helpful for you.

### **Homeopathy**

Homeopathy is a system of medicine that began in Europe about 200 years ago. It is based on the principle that "like cures like." This means that your symptoms are treated with small doses of a medicine that would cause those symptoms if a full dose were given.

Massage and touch  
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## **Massage and touch therapies**

There are many types of massage and touch therapies. Some involve light superficial touch and some massages go deep into tissue. Massage and touch therapies relieve stress and give you a sense of well-being. They can relax your body and may improve the circulation of your blood and other body fluids. Massage therapists sometimes use oils, aromatherapy and/or lotions.

Specific types of massage and touch therapies often used by people with HIV include reflexology, therapeutic touch, reiki, shiatsu, Trager, Bowen technique, osteopathy and chiropractic.

## **Meditation**

Meditation is an exercise of the mind in which you learn to become an observer of your thoughts. It is a simple practice, but it takes great discipline. Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace, joy and efficiency in everyday life.

## **Mind/body medicine**

Stress and anxiety can negatively affect your immune function and health. Mind/body medicine is based on the idea that the health of the mind affects the health of the body. It covers a number of health practices that focus on reducing stress, creating a sense of wellness and fostering spiritual and emotional connectedness to one's surroundings.

## **North American Aboriginal healing traditions**

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada include First Nations, Inuit/Innu and Métis. All of these peoples have different healing traditions, but share many common ideas, beliefs and images. These include: sharing and healing circles, traditional ceremonies, elders, traditional medicines, feasts and gatherings. Aboriginal healing traditions attempt to balance the four parts of the person: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. It is believed that illness is not necessarily a bad thing, but is rather a sign sent by the Creator in order to help people re-evaluate their lives.

There are two practices often used by Aboriginal people with HIV. In smudges, four sacred herbs are burned in a cleansing and purifying ritual.



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**Traditional Chinese  
medicine sees illness as  
an imbalance in your  
body's energy flow.**

In sweat lodges, heated stones are placed in a pit in a small, enclosed structure, water is poured on them, and the steam cleanses and purifies the participants.

### **Naturopathy**

The word naturopathy comes from Greek and means "a natural way to relieve suffering." Naturopathic practitioners, called naturopaths, see symptoms as your body's attempt to restore balance. They use a holistic approach to healing that can include herbal medicine, nutrition, supplements, homeopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, chiropractic (spinal manipulation), massage and counselling.

### **Tai Chi**

Tai Chi is a form of Chinese martial art involving a series of slow, rhythmic movements. This relaxing exercise tones your muscles, improves your posture, breathing and circulation, and increases your energy, strength and stamina.

### **Traditional Chinese medicine**

Traditional Chinese medicine is a complete, integrated system of healing. Traditional Chinese medicine sees illness as an imbalance in your body's energy flow. This energy, known as chi or qi, moves along invisible pathways in your body called meridians. Meridians connect your body's organ systems to each other and to pressure points. Techniques for Traditional Chinese medicine include acupuncture, herbs, exercises such as Tai Chi and qi gong, and nutrition to bring the body to a healthy state.

### **Yoga**

Yoga uses deep breathing, stretching, the holding of postures, meditation techniques and a diet of pure foods to establish a balance between body and mind and give you better control of your muscle systems, including your digestive system. Many people living with HIV report improved quality of life, more energy and less fatigue with regular yoga practice.

## **How to access and pay for complementary and alternative therapies**

Most complementary and alternative therapies listed in this chapter are not paid for by government drug coverage plans. However, some private health insurance benefits packages, such as those you may have through your employer, cover some of these therapies. Review your policy or speak to the person in charge of human resources where you work. Otherwise, you will need to pay for these therapies yourself.

Many complementary and alternative medicines, as well as herbs, are available from health food or supplement stores, and sometimes from drugstores. Other sources include Chinese herbalists and some practitioners. Options for people in smaller communities where these products are not readily available include specialized mail-order services and buyers' clubs. Your local AIDS service organization may have information about how to access complementary and alternative medicines and therapists in your area.

Some AIDS service organizations offer a limited range of complementary therapies free to people living with HIV. Some offer a limited fund for people with HIV to cover a portion of their out-of-pocket expenses for complementary and alternative therapies. Many also hold workshops on various complementary and alternative therapies, where you can try out these techniques for free, before spending your money on them. Also check with local complementary and alternative therapists for sliding-scale rates, student rates or barter systems.

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### **Putting it all together: a personal perspective**

When you look at the long list of complementary and alternative therapies that can benefit people living with HIV, making choices can seem overwhelming. In this section, I am going to describe how I have incorporated complementary and alternative therapies into my life. This is my personal perspective, and the

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Your local AIDS service organization will have information about how to access complementary and alternative medicines and therapists in your area.

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choices I have made do not need to be the ones that you make. What you choose to do depends on your circumstances, your health issues and your personality. But I hope that by sharing my perspective, you will be motivated to look at what complementary and alternative medicine has to offer you.

In order to make room for complementary and alternative medicine in your life, it's important to create quiet time. If you have a busy life already, you may need to prioritize your activities and possibly give some up in order to create quiet time for yourself.

With anti-HIV drugs, your doctor can measure your viral load and CD4+ cell count to see if your drugs are working. But there are not a lot of tests in complementary and alternative medicine to tell you which therapy is better for you than another. The key is to learn to listen to your body and to believe that you can tell what works best for it. It takes time to build a relationship with your body.

Even before my HIV diagnosis, my health was a big priority in life. So things that might otherwise seem like a chore have become part of my daily routine. Making my health my priority has created structure in my life. There are particular things that I do in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening. Other things, I do weekly or seasonally. I like the structure, personally.

### **A daily routine**

I wake early and begin the day by chanting Sanskrit hymns. I take my morning vitamins and micronutrients and anti-HIV drugs. I take a multivitamin, calcium with magnesium, vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, omega-3 and vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. Five mornings a week I go to the gym where I do resistance weights to combat bone thinning, which I've been diagnosed with. I also do yoga. The "high" of a workout feels good and it's a bonus that I like how my body looks, too. If I miss a day at the gym, I don't worry too much about it.

At lunch and at dinner I take more vitamins and micronutrients. At lunch, I take coenzyme Q10, vitamin C, zinc, selenium, N-acetyl cysteine, vitamin B complex and vitamin B<sub>6</sub>. At dinner, I take calcium/magnesium and omega-3 plus my anti-HIV drugs. In the evening, I meditate to Tibetan chants. I'm in bed well before midnight and I find my sleep is deep and restorative.

If I lose focus and don't do these core practices regularly, my body sends me a message. I become easily annoyed and agitated. I don't like how this feels, so I make sure to maintain these practices.

### **Eat healthy**

Good nutrition is essential. We know that high levels of HIV are found in the gut, even very early on in HIV disease. This can cause nutritional deficiencies. It doesn't need to cost lots of money to eat well. For breakfast, I eat non-fat organic yoghurt (I love Liberté organic yoghurt!) mixed with muesli that I make myself. I buy nuts and seeds at bulk food stores and mix them with fresh or dried fruit.

On the weekend, I try to do a juice. For this, you need a juicer. This will cost you about \$50 if you buy it new, but I often see them at garage sales. I tend to juice carrots, apples and beets with a slice of ginger. This is great for your kidneys and liver. The beets are good if you are slightly anemic and ginger is good for digestion.

I don't eat out much, because I enjoy the food I make for myself. I almost always pack a lunch and take it to work. I feel it's important to make good choices about the food you put into your body, but this doesn't mean you can't splurge every once in a while. What's life without cheesecake or dark chocolate? When you shop for groceries, read the labels. Ask yourself if there is a healthier substitute.

### **Take time for yourself**

Every few weeks I do a gastrointestinal cleanse using psyllium husks and a quality apple cider vinegar. Yes, it tastes awful! I also use a neti pot, which you can purchase at a health food store, to flush out my sinus passages regularly. This is a great little tool if you smoke or have frequent colds or sinus infections. Every Friday night, I take my ritual soak in the tub, with a lit candle and a few drops of essential oils. Your very own spa for minimal cost! I take Ayurvedic herbs on a seasonal basis, get a massage monthly and see my Traditional Chinese doctor every two months.

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Two practices that I am really enjoying right now are my electric massage chair and some new Holosync meditation tapes, which claim to work with your brain wave patterns. These tape takes me into a deep meditative state, often lulling me to sleep, but they are creating neural pathways in the brain that help me cope with stress. Both the chair and the tapes cost a bit of money, but I feel they they are worth it. I think of them as a long-term investment in my health.

### **Newly diagnosed?**

I've been doing these kinds of health practices for many years now. For a "newbie" to the world of HIV who wants to start a healthier lifestyle, I think that selecting a quality multivitamin and adopting an exercise program that really gets your heart pumping are good places to start. Of course, speak to your doctor first before starting an exercise program.

The cost of complementary and alternative therapies is an issue, but there are lots of very simple, inexpensive things that you can do for yourself. Look at your budget and see what you can afford. AIDS service organizations are good places to look for assistance when you are first starting out. Your local AIDS service organization may have a volunteer massage therapist on site, or they may have a fund to help you cover the costs of some of these therapies. Buy vitamins on sale and stock up.

Start with a multivitamin once a day. I feel that taking selenium, N-acetyl cysteine and omega-3 oils are also important for people with HIV.

### **The next stages**

After a few months, think about adding vitamin C, zinc and any other micronutrients that you can afford. The beauty of vitamins and micronutrients is if you miss a dose or stop taking them, it is perfectly fine. Try to buy good quality products. I would also recommend reading CATIE's fact sheets and practical guides on nutrition, multivitamins and micronutrients. Knowledge is power but if it is not put into action, it is useless.

The best part of complementary and alternative medicine is having sex! Yes, getting laid is a boost to the immune system! Let your imagination guide

you. If you are in a relationship, spice up your love life. If you're single, take a chance and go on a date, fall in love.

### Set yourself a goal

The point of these therapies isn't to make life more complicated than it needs to be. I feel that if you set yourself a goal, whether it's to have more energy, or to put on more muscle, or to be less stressed, and then you work toward it, you'll be successful.

Little baby steps are the way to start. Conduct a scan of your life. Determine what you want to add, delete or enhance. Make a list of ten things you want to do for your health. This list could include things as simple as taking a half hour walk daily, or a multivitamin daily or soaking in the tub once a week. From this list, pick two of the easiest and get started! Every six months or so, add one or two more things from this list. If you have doubts, assume failure is impossible.

Give yourself a good reason to wake up every morning. Take joy in learning new things for your body, mind and spirit. Expand your mind. If you have access to the Internet, there is so much you can learn online for free. Most important of all, do not be defined by HIV. You are so much more than the sum total of your HIV serostatus, viral load and CD4+ cell count!

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## Resources

### *Practical Guides for People Living with HIV*

CATIE's practical guide series contains extensive information about complementary and alternative medicine. See:

- *A Practical Guide to Complementary Therapies for People Living with HIV*
- *A Practical Guide to Herbal Therapies for People Living with HIV*
- *A Practical Guide to Nutrition for People Living with HIV*
- *A Practical Guide to Managing HIV Drug Side Effects*

### *The Positive Side*

Health and wellness magazine contains articles about complementary therapies, such as:

- The role of naturopathic medicine in HIV


## COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

- Sensual aromatherapy
- Introduction to Yoga
- In-te-grate

Look under *Complementary and Alternative Therapies* in the e-zine index ([www.positiveside.ca](http://www.positiveside.ca))

Plain and Simple Factsheets on Complementary Therapies 

Available in multiple languages

*In-Depth Factsheets on supplements* 

Comprehensive information for people living with HIV and their care providers

These and many other relevant resources can be accessed on CATIE's website ([www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)), through the CATIE Ordering Centre ([www.orders.catie.ca](http://www.orders.catie.ca)) or by calling CATIE at 1-800-263-1368.

## NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears slightly aged or off-white. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.