

The Seven Deadly Sins for Those Wishing to Live Long & Well with HIV

by Lark Lands

Deadly Sin #1: Thinking the disease is over with.

It isn't. When you reach the point where it's appropriate, highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) can certainly suppress the virus, restore at least some lost immune function, and greatly slow disease progression but it is by no means a final and complete answer. Issues of drug resistance and drug side effects make long-term use of toxic drug regimens very problematic. If you want long-term good results, all aspects of the disease must still be handled appropriately. Before drugs are started, this means doing everything possible to slow disease progression and prevent symptoms with good nutrition and other non-drug means. Once highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) is started, it's terribly important to protect yourself from the drugs' side effects, to the greatest extent possible.

Deadly Sin #2: Ignoring the nutrient needs created by both the disease and the drugs you take.

First, remember that whether you are not yet taking antiretrovirals, or are already on HAART, your body is still fighting an ongoing battle. It needs higher levels of nutrients to do that. You can't power the body's immune response or build any cell in the body, including replacement immune cells, without the nutrient building blocks. You need to consume good levels of protein, good levels of mostly unrefined complex carbohydrates, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and moderate amounts of good fats every day, along with lots of good healthful liquids (always making sure that the food you eat and the water you drink is safe!). That's the way you give your body the building blocks it needs to keep up the immense battle against HIV. And remember that numerous studies have shown slower disease progression in people with higher levels of nutrients, so when you're not yet on HAART, they're one of your best weapons against HIV.

Second, realize that nutrients can help to prevent or reduce the side effects and toxicity that drugs might otherwise cause while also improving their uptake and absorption. You can help your body to handle the assault of all the drugs you're taking by giving it good nutrition, plenty of healthful fluids, appropriate supplementation, and plenty of liver and kidney support.

With liver-toxic drugs, consider L-carnitine (or L-acetyl-carnitine), and the nutrients that maintain glutathione levels in the liver: alpha-lipoic acid, vitamins C & E, N-acetyl-cysteine (NAC), and L-glutamine. Silymarin (milk thistle extract) may also be very useful for maintaining liver health.

For the mitochondrial toxicity caused by nucleoside analogues—which may, in turn, cause or contribute to fat changes in the body, especially the lipodystrophy-associated fat loss called lipoatrophy, as well as neuropathy (nerve damage), myopathy (muscle aches), pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), fatty liver, white blood cell and platelet decreases, anemia, and, in its severest form, potentially lethal lactic acidosis, a condition in which lactic acid builds up in the blood, sometimes to life-threatening levels: L-carnitine or acetyl-L-carnitine, coenzyme Q-10, B complex vitamins (especially riboflavin and thiamine), and a plentiful supply of all the important antioxidants (especially alpha-lipoic acid, N-acetyl-cysteine, vitamins E and C, the carotenoids, selenium).

To help prevent or reverse neuropathy, consider the fatty acids alpha-lipoic acid and gamma-linolenic acid, L-acetyl-carnitine, biotin, choline, inositol, B-12, B-6, thiamine, other B vitamins (as found in a B complex), and magnesium. (See Neuropathy fact sheet at www.larklands.net)

To help with elevated blood fats, consider L-carnitine (especially for triglycerides) and the B vitamin niacin (consult with your doc; liver enzymes should be monitored with high doses of niacin).

To help with kidney stress, drink large quantities of water, spread throughout the day; aim for a large glass every hour or so and, especially, every time you take your meds. A simple rule to ensure adequate water intake: divide your weight in pounds in half, and drink that many ounces every day.

To help with drug-induced intestinal gas and bloating, take a pancreatic enzyme formula that contains lipase with meals (1-4 tabs, as needed). Of the prescription forms, Digestive Care Inc.'s Pancrecarb may be best.

In addition, with AZT (or any drug that contains it, including Retrovir, Combivir, and Trizivir), help the body process the drug and support the bone marrow to help prevent blood cell decreases with B₁₂, zinc, vitamin E, B₁, B₃, B₆, L-carnitine, and magnesium.

For the best results with all drugs, never forget the need for good absorption; see Deadly Sin #3.

Third, never forget that nutrient supplementation can often help to eliminate HIV disease-related symptoms such as fatigue, skin problems, malabsorption (and the diarrhea and gas it causes), memory loss and other cognitive problems, neuropathy, and many others. In order to be able to continue to manage a difficult disease long-term, you need to feel good!

For much more in-depth information on eliminating drug side effects and other symptoms, see **Fact sheet #5, *Drug Side Effects and Other Symptoms: Tips on Countering or Preventing Them*** at www.larklands.net)

Deadly Sin #3: Ignoring your intestines.

OK, it sounds silly but if your intestines aren't working properly, you won't absorb either drugs or nutrients well. The results can be serious nutrient loss, wasting, and malabsorption of drugs. The latter can lead to lowered effectiveness and increased development of drug resistance. Use the nutrients that help heal and maintain the intestines, including zinc, vitamin A, B vitamins, and, especially, L-glutamine which can help ensure the absorptive capacity of the small intestine and, thus, both the adequacy of the drug level that ends up in your bloodstream and the continuing uptake of nutrients. Natural anti-inflammatories may also help. As a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids, fish oil is the best of these. Other possibilities are ginger, quercetin and other bioflavonoids.

Deadly Sin #4: Ignoring instructions on taking drugs correctly.

Of course, you've heard this before but never forget: antiretroviral drugs must be taken very consistently, as per the precise dosage instructions. Never skip doses, and always take them precisely as directed (with or without food, with large amounts of liquid, a certain amount of time before or after a meal, etc.). This is terribly important to improve uptake and prevent toxicity and side effects. If you skip doses or take drugs improperly, effectiveness goes down and resistance goes up. *And remember: doing everything to eliminate side effects can help keep you on the drugs as scheduled because you won't be getting the miserable symptoms that make you want to not take them!*

Deadly Sin #5: Ignoring the maintenance of body cell mass that's crucial for survival.

Wasting is still killing people. Monitor your body's status with both regular weight measurements and bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA). If either weight or body cell mass begins to decline, address it aggressively. For both men and women, it's critical to test testosterone levels and use hormone replacement therapy, where necessary, both to maintain lean tissue and, a nice side benefit, maintain your sex drive and your good mood. For those with any level of serious wasting, recombinant human growth hormone (Serostim) may be very important to prevent the loss of the body cell mass that keeps you alive.

Maintaining the body in these ways will not only promote survival but also help you look better, function better, and feel better. Women may also need female hormone replacement. Moderating cytokines may also be crucial. Using carnitine, vitamins E & C, NAC, and alpha-lipoic acid may help lower elevated tumor necrosis factor and, thus, contribute to preventing wasting. And never forget that exercise, especially progressive resistance exercise like weight training, is crucial for building and maintaining muscles which contain a large proportion of your body cell mass.

Deadly Sin #6: Thinking that reducing viral load fully and quickly restores immune function.

If immune cells were ever lowered, you may not have speedy or complete immune restoration even when CD4 counts go back up. Even though the evidence for immune cell restoration after a period of time on HAART is encouraging, the specific time frame for this is unknown and may vary widely between individuals. Studies have shown encouraging results when people discontinue either maintenance therapies (for an infection like CMV or cryptosporidiosis) or prophylactics (against common opportunistic infections), indicating that the body's immune ability may, indeed, have returned, if not fully, at least enough to control or prevent some infections.

However, until we have better tests for assessing the return of immune function (perhaps a lymphocyte proliferation assay that includes all the usual pathogens that cause problems; this is *not* yet available although researchers are working on it), it will be impossible to know precisely who is protected from what.

Whether you're participating in immune restoration research or waiting for your body to restore itself, remember that optimal nutrient status is crucial for the best results. The thymus gland that programs T cells is very sensitive to nutrient deficiencies; cell expansion requires nutrients to build and maintain the cells; and just maintaining immune response, in general, requires good nutrient status since virtually every nutrient is required for some aspect of immune function.

Deadly Sin #7: Failing to manage this disease properly, day in and day out, month in and month out, year in and year out, and on and on.

The good news is: you've got much better weapons now in the fight to live long and well with HIV. The bad news is: it's a lot of work that isn't likely to decrease any time soon. You have to eat the good diet, handle the hormone problems, do the exercise, take the drugs precisely, protect the body from infections, and take the nutrients that are necessary to (1) provide protection against disease effects and drug side effects, (2) help prevent disease progression and infections, (3) rebuild damaged tissue and replace cells, and (4) prevent symptoms. And with all that hard work, you need to try to keep the optimistic hopeful outlook that literally programs you for survival. And we're not talking about doing all this for the next ten minutes. We're talking about every day for the rest of your, it is fondly to be hoped, long and happy life. It isn't easy. It isn't fun. It isn't cheap. It is necessary.

LARK LANDS is an internationally respected treatment expert, a contributing writer for *The Positive Side*, *POZ Magazine*, *CATIE's Practical Guides*, the www.AIDSmeds.com website, the Houston Buyers Club, and the Boston Buyers Club, and a long-time treatment activist, journalist, and educator. A former think tank scientist and the long-time Science Editor of *POZ Magazine*, she was a pioneer in bringing attention to the need for a total integrated approach to HIV disease. She believes that we should teach people how to live *well* with HIV, not just longer, by combining the most effective pharmaceutical treatments with supportive hormonal, nutritional and complementary therapies. Her articles have been widely published and reprinted in AIDS newsletters and websites, and described by AIDS journalists as "one of the most valuable guides to developing strategies for survival of AIDS in print to date." She is a frequent speaker at international, national, state, and local AIDS conferences, and has presented keynote or plenary addresses to many of the largest AIDS conferences in North America. Lark has given her *Positively Well* seminar to thousands of people in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Currently, she is co-presenting with River Huston a new seminar called *Living Well...Not Just Longer!!*

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