

Anyone can suffer from a psychological problem, but if you are living with HIV you have a greater chance than the general population. This may be partly because you are suffering additional concern about having the virus, subject to discrimination for being homosexual or consuming drugs, or living outside your own country and lacking close support.

There is also, however, a physical explanation, because if your immune system is very weak (or in other words you have a low CD4 count), you can suffer from infections that affect mental health.

Mental problems associated with HIV

Before HIV treatment was broadly available, people with weak immune systems could develop mental problems such as dementia and obsession.

With antiretroviral treatment, these occur very rarely and even though HIV can affect the brain, its consequences are much milder if therapy is effective. Some drugs, however, can give rise to side effects of a psychological nature.

Emotional discomfort

Some occurrences (being diagnosed with HIV, losing a loved one, the break-up of a relationship, or economic problems, etc.) and certain side effects of the drugs can lead to feelings of unhappiness that may be hard to deal with or may interfere with your daily life.

At such times it is very useful to have not only the support of family and friends, but also professional help. If you find it hard to get psychological support at your health centre, some HIV organisations can offer professional help, counselling workshops or peer support.

Some people also use complementary therapies (Reiki, acupuncture, shiatsu, and Bach flower remedies, etc.) although these are generally not offered in hospitals and so you have to pay for them yourself or find an organisation that provides them for free.

Depression

Patients with HIV have a greater chance of suffering from depression than the population at large, although it is sometimes difficult to determine the reason why.

People with depression have most (or all) of the following symptoms on a daily basis for several weeks: low spirits, apathy, poor concentration, irritability, insomnia, waking up early or sleeping too much, an inability to relax, weight loss or gain, a lack of satisfaction in normal activity, feelings of low self-esteem, excessive guilt and recurring thoughts of death or suicide.

Should you be diagnosed with depression, your doctor may recommend taking antidepressant drugs. In this case, you should inform the health personnel attending you that you are receiving antiretroviral therapy in order to prevent interaction among the different drugs.

If you opt for alternative remedies, care should be taken

because some may cause problems. St John's Wort, for example, can interact with some antiretroviral drugs.

Antidepressants may take a while to work and you will have to take them to suit your personal circumstances. You should follow your doctor's indications and not simply stop taking them because you feel better.

Side effects of a psychological nature

Efavirenz (Sustiva® and also Atripla®) is known to cause psychological problems: some people may find it hard to sleep or may suffer nightmares or vivid dreams, while others say they feel depressed for no apparent reason.

If you also have hepatitis C, you should be aware that treatment with Interferon can lead to psychological problems: mainly depression.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of panic or worry that may cause sweating, a faster heart rate, agitation, restlessness, headaches and panic attacks. It is often due to feelings of fear or insecurity and may sometimes accompany depression.

Talking about the reasons and feelings that cause anxiety with a friend or a professional may be useful. For some people, massages or other complementary therapies help them to relieve the symptoms of anxiety.

Some drugs used to treat anxiety may cause addiction and it is therefore important that you use them for a short time and always follow a doctor's instructions.

Tratamientos psicológicos

Habitualmente, los fármacos para los problemas mentales funcionan mejor si se combinan con determinadas terapias psicológicas, que requieren un número de sesiones con un/a psicólogo/a o psicoterapeuta.

Psychological treatments

Drugs for mental problems usually work better if combined with specific psychological therapies, which require a number of sessions with a psychologist or psychotherapist.

Where to look for help and support

If you have a psychological problem, you can try to seek help. Your doctor may be able to find a solution (changing retroviral therapy, providing treatment or referring you to a psychologist) if you inform her about your case.

Some HIV organisations provide psychological services and run self-help groups that can offer support.



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