

A photograph of red berries and yellow autumn leaves on a wooden surface. The berries are in the foreground, and the leaves are scattered around them. The background is a blurred wooden surface.

# HIV and ageing

Hiv  Aids



## **TO THE READER**

This brochure provides information about the impact of ageing on living one's life as HIV positive. The brochure has been compiled in cooperation with the HUS Infectious Diseases Clinic and the Finnish HIV Center.





## HIV and ageing today

Currently, there are a little under 3,000 HIV positive people in Finland. In 2014, 31% of them were in the age range of 50 to 64, and 8% were 65 or over. With advances in medical treatment, HIV has turned into a chronic illness. Thus an elderly HIV positive patient may have already had an HIV infection for years or even decades. Thanks to medication, the life expectancy of someone infected with HIV can be almost the same as that of the rest of the population. It is possible to lead a full life with HIV infection, even when ageing. This does require adhering to regular medical treatment and follow-up, as well as taking care of your own health.

Every year, an increasing share of people infected with HIV are over 50 years old. HIV tests should be actively offered to everyone – irrespective of their age – because new HIV infections are diagnosed in ever older people. In 2014, of all new infections, 14% were diagnosed in people over 50. Factors contributing to this development include the lack of a need to worry about birth control due to menopause, and therefore not using condoms for intercourse.



## HIV and AIDS

HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that destroys the defence system of the organism. The HI virus penetrates into certain types of white cells and destroys them. The virus can also easily transform itself and is, therefore, difficult to destroy with drugs. Without medical treatment, the defensive capacity of the organism will gradually deteriorate, and the patient will be exposed to several different diseases. If left untreated, HIV leads to AIDS.



## How is HIV transmitted?

**The human immunodeficiency virus is not easily transmitted. The virus does not spread through air or surface contact: it requires contact of mucous membranes or blood to be transmitted.**

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### **Routes of HIV transmission include:**

- unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with an HIV positive person
- unprotected oral sex with an HIV positive person; the party who gets vaginal fluids, sperm or pre-ejaculatory fluid in his or her mouth is at risk
- transfusion of blood or transplantation of an organ containing HI virus
- use of injecting equipment containing HI virus
- from a mother to a child during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding



## Diagnosis of infection

HIV infection is diagnosed with an HIV antibody test. HIV can be detected in the test one to three months after contracting the infection. HIV infection is not visible, and it cannot be diagnosed based on symptoms. Someone infected with HIV may be symptomless for years.

The test can be a rapid finger-prick test or a sample of blood extracted from a vein. In Finland, the tests are carried out everywhere in the health care service, the Finnish HIV Center and the Finnish Red Cross (SPR). Diagnosing the infection as soon as possible after the infection has taken place provides good possibilities for taking care of one's own health and protecting others.



## Is there a medical cure for HIV?

HIV infection is a chronic disease which requires follow-up and medical care. Currently, there is no curing medical treatment for HIV, but medication prolongs the life span of an HIV positive person and improves their quality of life.

The treatment of HIV is based on antiretroviral medication, which is usually applied as a combination of three viral drugs. The medication slows down the growth of the virus and prevents the infection of healthy cells. The medication helps to normalise the defensive capacity of the organism, and the progress of the disease can be stopped. In that case, the infection will not progress to the AIDS phase.

Medication is always started individually based on an evaluation made by an infectious disease specialist. The medication will continue throughout the patient's life.

Currently available medication can also help to lower the growth of the virus in people who have reached the AIDS phase. Opportunistic infections can also be treated efficiently.



## Ageing and medication

There is no need to adjust well-functioning HIV medication or change it just because of ageing. What is essential, irrespective of age, is how well the medicine suits the person in question. The antiretroviral treatment used in HIV care is effective medication which improves the quality of life and prolongs life.

For the medicines to retain their effect, they must be taken regularly, as prescribed. To ensure absorption and effect, some medicines must be taken with food. If you forget to take the medicine on time, it is usually better to take it late than to skip it.

When you become older, new diseases or ailments may occur, and it becomes necessary to medicate them. It is important to remember to discuss new medication or natural remedies with the attending physician before starting to use them, and ensure their compatibility with the HIV medication. Some medicines, natural remedies or vitamin preparations may render HIV medicines ineffective. On the other hand, HIV medicines may increase or decrease the concentration of other medicines in a dangerous manner.

**“I have been taking the same medicines for quite some time, and they suit me well. I have not had problems with the medication.”**

Male aged 65+,  
has had HIV for over 20 years.

**“My HIV medication has remained the same for a long time, and I have not experienced any adverse effects. What has changed along with ageing is that today, I take my medicines very regularly and I am well prepared: the medicines are always with me. When I was younger, I sometimes forgot to carry the medicines when travelling.”**

Male aged 55+, has had HIV  
for over 20 years.

A photograph of two women laughing together outdoors. The woman on the left is older with short, curly grey hair, wearing a light blue sweater and a colorful striped scarf. The woman on the right is younger with short dark hair, wearing a light blue jacket over a purple top. They are both smiling broadly and looking at each other. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a beach or park.

**“Ageing has had no impact on my medical care. As with all medicines, one must always inform physicians of the HIV medication and other medicines, to avoid unpleasant synergies of medicines. My HIV status has been known at my occupational health care from the beginning, and there have been no problems.”**

Female aged 55+,  
has had HIV for 15 years.



## Will I live as long as the others?

The life expectancy of someone infected with HIV is almost the same as that of anybody else. This has been enabled by advanced medical care.

Without medication, the life expectancy of a person infected with HIV is about 10 to 12 years.

After transmission, the development of the HIV infection depends on the time elapsed before it is diagnosed, medication, the resistance of the virus to medication, the resistance of the person who has been infected, their age, possible other diseases and many other factors.



## Can I ever have sex again?

Everyone has the right to healthy and satisfactory sex life. Being HIV positive does not remove this right; that is, an HIV-positive person can have sex. Sexuality and sex are also part of the life of the elderly and an important part of well-being for many. It is essential to remember safe sex, that is, using a condom and taking your medication regularly. With regular medical care, it is possible to achieve a virus count that does not show in the measurements, in which case the risk of transmission is non-existent in practice.



## Does HIV affect ageing? Does ageing affect HIV?

Ageing introduces changes in one's fitness, body and health. All of these changes are individual. The risk of certain opportunistic diseases is known to be higher for ageing HIV-positive people. Such opportunistic diseases include, for example, diabetes, different types of cancer, different cardiovascular diseases and osteoporosis. HIV-positive people may experience earlier and more rapid development of these diseases than the rest of the population. Furthermore, HIV infection may impact cognitive skills and elevate the risk of memory disorders.

The stigma and discrimination related to HIV may expose you to depression, irrespective of age, and even make you experience the physical symptoms related to the disease more strongly than normal. Many HIV-positive people have encountered discrimination or prejudice related to HIV.

**“I have encountered some health problems when getting older, but they are not directly connected with HIV. Sometimes I forget things, but I don't know if it is part of getting older or has something to do with HIV.”**

Male aged 65+, has had HIV for 20 years.

**“HIV has not affected my ageing; it affected me more when I was young. When I was young, I felt that HIV restricted my life, today I feel that everything is possible.”**

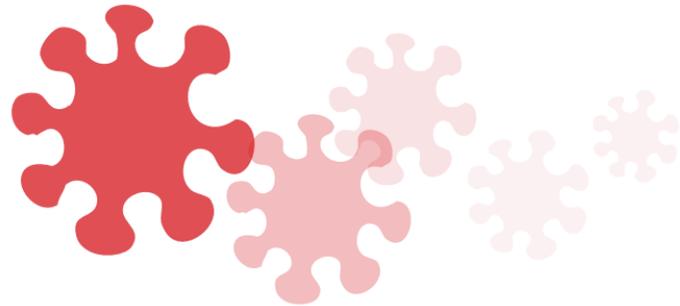
Male aged 55+, has had HIV for 20 years.

**“HIV as such has not really affected my life. I cannot know if the ailments that have occurred with age have resulted from HIV or just from ageing. For example, stiffness, memory loss and getting slower are things that normally come with age, and one cannot think that they have happened only because of HIV.”** Female aged 55+, has had HIV for 15 years.



## What can I do to promote my own health?

- Meet with your attending infectious disease specialist regularly and discuss your state of health openly with them. Remember to also mention your possible other illnesses and medications to the specialist.
- Take your HIV medication regularly and as prescribed.
- Before starting a new medicine or natural remedy, always verify its compatibility with your HIV medication.
- Take care that you follow a healthy way of life: Exercise regularly, pursue healthy eating habits and sleep enough. If you smoke or use alcohol, consider stopping or cutting down.





## Where can I get information, help and support?

### **HIV CENTER**

The Finnish HIV Center is a professional operator which carries out preventive work and offers services for people with HIV and their family and friends, and those fearing infection. Low-threshold services of the Finnish HIV Center include rapid HIV testing and phone and online counselling. HIV testing is available at all locations of the Center by scheduling a visit by calling the help line.

- The phone service operates Mon to Thu from 10am to 3:30pm at +358 (0)2 07 465 705.
- The online service is available at [www.hivtukikeskus.fi](http://www.hivtukikeskus.fi) / [www.hivcenter.fi](http://www.hivcenter.fi)

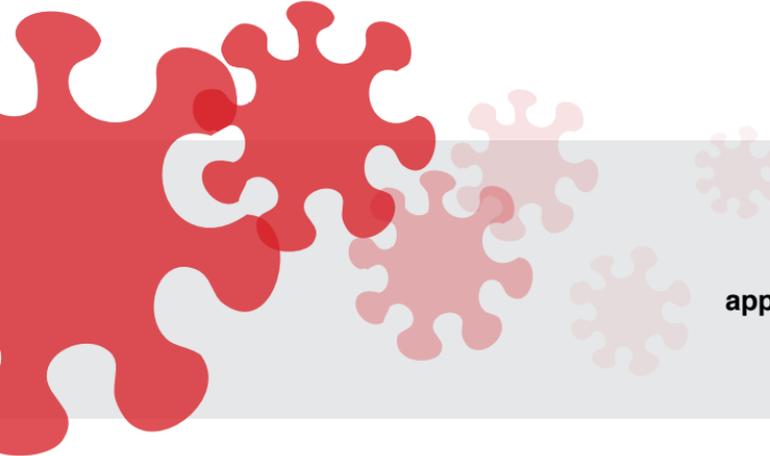
The Finnish HIV Center also offers the opportunity for crisis and support counselling and peer support. All of the services of the Finnish HIV Center are free of charge, anonymous and confidential. The services are available in Finnish, Russian, Somali and English. If a customer requests it, an interpreter can be used. The offices of the Finnish HIV Center are located in Helsinki, Tampere and Oulu.

### **PEER SUPPORT GROUP AND ADAPTATION TRAINING COURSES AT THE FINNISH HIV CENTER**

In a peer support group or on adaptation training courses, you have the opportunity to meet other HIV patients and their families and friends. More information about the group and courses is available at the Finnish HIV Center.

### **OTHER ORGANIZATIONS:**

- Peer support organisation and supervisor of the interests of HIV-positive people and their families and friends and patient organisation for HIV-positive and AIDS patients: HIV Finland, +358 (0)9 692 5441, [www.positiiviset.fi](http://www.positiiviset.fi)
- The Finnish Red Cross (SPR) HIV advice line +358 2032 7000  
Mon–Thu between 5.00 p.m and 8.00 p.m.
- The Finnish Red Cross Pluspiste locations in Jyväskylä, Joensuu, Kuopio and Seinäjoki



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**HIV CENTER**

Unioninkatu 45 K, 00170 Helsinki

**HIV Center information line and  
appointment booking for HIV tests** +358 207 465 705

(Mon-Thu, 10.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.)

[www.hivcenter.fi](http://www.hivcenter.fi)

