

---

# HIV Nutrition Education

## Fact Sheet

---



## Nutrition & HIV: Start with the Basics

Nutrition is a life-sustaining treatment and the role of nutrition in the treatment of HIV is critical. HIV affects each person differently. The key to good nutrition is to have a daily nutritional plan that meets your needs. Ask to speak to the dietitian at your clinic and develop a meal plan to fit your needs. If there is none, encourage your medical provider to hire one and in the meantime ask to be referred to a dietitian knowledgeable in HIV care. You must be the one to insist on making nutrition a priority.

### The Importance of Nutrition

Nutrition means your intake: the amount and quality of foods you eat, the liquids you drink, and the dietary supplements you take. Intake can be measured by the number of servings you have of each food group, and by the calories and nutrients, like carbohydrate, protein, and fat, vitamins and minerals, as well as other important substances found in your food and drink.

Nutrition also means how your foods, liquids, and supplements get digested into the nutrients that then move from your digestive system into your bloodstream to be carried to different parts of your body and used in metabolism, the functions and processes, which support life.

Think of nutrition as links in a chain. The first link is what you choose to eat and drink. Second is how well it can be digested. Third is how effectively your body can utilize these nutrients. You need all three links. The one that you have most control over is intake. If any link in the chain is broken, malnutrition can result. Poor food intake hurts the first link, vomiting and diarrhea hurt the second, and fevers, abnormal metabolism, and infections hurt the third. Malnutrition can be measured and identified by body cell (muscle) and weight loss, and as decrease of blood protein called albumin, and other markers in the blood like hematocrit, hemoglobin, and cholesterol.

HIV infects the cells that line the gastrointestinal tract and can make eating, digestion, absorption, and elimination painful, difficult, and less effective. When severe, malnutrition can cause illness and death, even with higher CD-4 cell levels. Weight loss and lower albumin levels increase the risk of hospitalization and length of stay. It has been established that death follows when there has been a decline to 66% of ideal body weight and a decline to 54% of usual body cell mass.

What you eat makes a very real difference in how you feel and how well you do medically. People with HIV can have problems that directly hurt their nutritional health. Your nutritional health directly affects your immune system.

### Factors in Wasting

Malnutrition and wasting can be caused by four general factors. Any of these problems should be addressed with your doctor, who should also refer you to a registered dietitian.

1. Low intake of calories and nutrients: There are many causes for low intake. Some people suffer loss of appetite from depression, infection, fever, medications, treatment with chemotherapy or radiation, fatigue, diarrhea, or nausea or have fear of eating. Other reasons are due to pain or difficulty chewing, tasting, or swallowing. Some people have financial problems or cannot get around easily and do not have access to food.
2. Malabsorption: This occurs when foods are not getting broken down into nutrients, or if they are, cannot be carried out of the gut into the circulation system. If you have diarrhea or vomiting, food and liquid is not

---

### For more information or to sign up for a nutrition class call:

Janelle L'Heureux MS RD: 213-201-1556 [jlheureux@apla.org](mailto:jlheureux@apla.org) or go to [www.apla.org](http://www.apla.org) & click on Calendar. APLA copyright © 2006. For persons with disabilities, reasonable accommodation may be provided upon request. Please call 213-201-1582 TTY (for voice, call California Relay Service first at 711, then give operator the TTY number) at least 5 working days in advance to ensure availability.

completely being absorbed. Problems causing the malabsorption can be due to medication, malnutrition, or infection. Diarrhea or vomiting may be made worse when there is lactose intolerance or fat malabsorption.

3. **Abnormalities in metabolism:** Metabolism is the process of using nutrients to run the body. There may be an increased demand for calories protein, and nutrients.
4. **The wasting of muscles from not being used:** The “use it or lose it” concept is true. Changes in activity can occur when there are changes in work or social routines, or you just don’t feel mentally or physically well enough to keep up your usual physical activity or exercise.

### **Protein Breakdown**

Without enough calories and nutrients from foods vital body tissue protein may be used for fuel. This protein breakdown process is called catabolism. The result is called wasting or cachexia with muscle “atrophy,” a decrease in the size of cells, tissues, and organs. Skeletal muscle loss may be visibly noticed and sometimes not. Weight may not change even though muscle mass has changed. Other body systems can be negatively affected, too. Other problems caused as a result of using protein for fuel include:

- A decreased in immune system competence,
- Increased risk of infections, like PCP,
- Atrophy of the small intestine villi, resulting in difficulty digesting, absorbing, and using nutrients.

### **Short Bursts of Weight Loss**

Weight loss often occurs around the time of any infection, generally because that person feels too sick to eat or to eat enough. Along with weight lose there is the breakdown and loss of muscle. Muscle is also sometimes called lean body mass, tissue, or body cell mass.

If the weight loss is not stopped, continued loss of lean body mass with each infection can lead to malnutrition. During an infection, the body needs more fuel, calories, protein, and other nutrients to fight back.

Take aggressive action. Don’t wait and think it will pass. If you are not eating like you usually do for more than two days, call your doctor and insist on getting help. Ask for aggressive nutrition support. No one at home or in the hospital has to lose weight.

### **Get Your Nutrition Trip Together: A Five-Point Plan**

#### **1. The Diet**

In general, practice eating high protein, high complex carbohydrates, and moderate fat foods, and drink plenty of fluids, 8-12 cups a day. Eat on a regular basis every few hours and whenever you are hungry. Take a general multiple-vitamin and mineral supplement daily and B complex daily. Attend to any nutrition concern. Individually, adjust this plan as conditions warrant.

#### **2. Physical Activity**

Practice getting some physical activity on a routine basis. Activity can make a physical and psychological difference. It can make you stronger, more alert and relieve stress.

#### **3. Sleep**

Set up a routine so that your sleep is steady and uninterrupted. Try not to sleep too few or too many hours each night. Get attention if there is a problem.

#### **4. Stress Management**

Do things that make sense and support your self-esteem. Correct the tasks or situations that hurt your self-esteem. Include ways to release stress and ways to relax.

#### **5. Unconditional Love**

Make decisions and do things for you out of self-love and self-respect. This is really the key point. When you are paying attention to loving yourself, everything else is easier.

---

#### **For more information or to sign up for a nutrition class call:**

Janelle L'Heureux MS RD: 213-201-1556 [jlheureux@apla.org](mailto:jlheureux@apla.org) or go to [www.apla.org](http://www.apla.org) & click on Calendar. APLA copyright © 2006. For persons with disabilities, reasonable accommodation may be provided upon request. Please call 213-201-1582 TTY (for voice, call California Relay Service first at 711, then give operator the TTY number) at least 5 working days in advance to ensure availability.