

Gastrointestinal (GI) Problems

Loose stool, stomach pain and feeling sick to your stomach are common when you have HIV. They may be due to HIV, HIV meds, or other factors. They can disturb your life in many ways.

The GI tract is a long tube that starts at the mouth and ends at the anus. A healthy GI tract helps your body absorb what you put into it. This makes HIV meds work better.

Signs

The signs can range from mild to severe. They include:

- Heartburn
- Loose stools
- Not hungry
- Sick to your stomach and throwing up
- Pain when you swallow
- Stomach pain, cramps and bloating
- Weight loss

Causes

Many things can cause GI problems:

- Spicy foods
- Infections from bacteria or parasites. HIV makes these more likely.
- HIV meds. Your doctor may need to change the type or dose of med.
- Certain over-the-counter medicines like aspirin or ibuprofen
- Low stomach acid
- Reflux disease (GERD)
- HIV in the GI tract

- Anal sex without a condom. This can lead to infections of the anus or rectum.
- Cancers of the GI tract. Kaposi's sarcoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma are linked to HIV.
- Oral-Anal sex without a dental dam or plastic film.

People with HIV should pay attention to GI symptoms. They may be signs of something more severe. Report all GI problems to your doctor.

How to Know You Have a GI Problem

A doctor may do a blood test to see if you have a GI problem. The doctor may also order scans to look inside the GI tract.

Treatment

Most GI problems can be treated with success. Treatment controls symptoms and other infections.

A doctor may need to change your HIV meds to get rid of the GI problem.

Avoid Side Effects from HIV Meds

HIV meds make your immune system stronger. This helps prevent GI infections. Some meds have major side effects or lead to other illness. GI signs are often the first clue.

Some GI problems from HIV drugs include:

- **Lactic acidosis.** This is a build up of lactate in the blood. Lactate is a waste made when the body turns sugar to energy.
- **Pancreatitis.** This is a severe infection of the pancreas that may lead to death.
- **Sudden liver failure.** It is most likely in the first four months of treatment with Viramune® (Nevirapine). It is rare, but most common in women with CD4 counts above 250 or men with CD4 counts above

400. Pregnant women and those with chronic hepatitis B or C are also at higher risk.

How to Prevent GI Problems

These steps can be taken to prevent GI problems:

- Wash your hands often. Always wash before you eat or handle food
- Cook meat and eggs all the way through
- Drink filtered, distilled, or boiled water
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold
- Eat at least three hours before you lie down. This helps prevent heartburn and upset stomach.
- Avoid spicy or greasy foods, or foods with a lot of acid.
- Drink plenty of water when you take pills. This helps them dissolve.
- Be careful how much aspirin or other over-the-counter pain killers you take
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Be careful what you eat and drink when you travel
- Practice safer sex.

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

