

Considering Anti-HIV Therapy: Personal Stories

Deciding whether or not to go on anti-HIV drugs can bring up many difficult feelings. Four PositiveWords board members discuss what this decision was like for them:

Octavio Vallejo

"I tested positive in 1990. When I was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994, I realized that I needed to do something against this disease. But it was very difficult to overcome the fear and emotional distress of knowing that my health was at risk. Knowing the limits and potential side effects of the anti-HIV drugs was also overwhelming. I cannot describe the anguish of facing the fact that I needed to start drug therapy – I did not sleep for three nights.

In the long run I am very grateful for the second chance of life that these drugs have brought me. I have hope again for my future. However, I am a little skeptical because we are still learning about HIV, but I hope we are going to be here for the cure."

Octavio Vallejo is a physician from Mexico.

Bob Munk

"I tested positive in 1987. My CD4 cell count was over 1,000 so I decided to wait to start treatment. Now, almost 15 years later, I still don't take HIV meds. My CD4 cell count is around 700 and my viral load is pretty low at around 10,000 copies.

I take vitamins and herbal supplements, use acupuncture, and try to eat a healthy diet. I don't want to take the drugs. I don't want to deal with the side effects or the emotional and social effects.

Taking meds has gotten easier, but I'm going to hold off as long as possible. I

won't wait until I get sick, but I'll talk to my doctor when my CD4 count drops to 350. I'll agonize about it. It won't be easy to start."

Bob Munk is an AIDS activist and coordinator of an HIV information website.

Deneen Robinson-Fountain

"My HIV status was discovered after a long bout of pneumonia. I was given my diagnosis in the hospital. Within the first 30 minutes of living with HIV, I was told that I would begin AZT and other medications. I was uninformed about my health and followed the instructions.

Then I began to research treatment options, how HIV impacted women and how I could teach my children about my status. I learned that an informed consumer should participate in his/her own care and treatment decisions. For me, learning about HIV and my options has helped me make decisions throughout ten years of living with HIV disease."


Deneen Robinson-Fountain is an African-American mom, client advocate and health educator.

Marina Alvarez

"Diagnosed HIV positive in 1985, I delayed going on medication for 15 years. Over the years, I've developed a good relationship with my doctor. He acknowledges that I am an informed consumer and that the final

decision to start treatment is a personal choice. A steady rise in my viral load count became the determining factor in my decision to go on anti-HIV medication.

Psychologically, this decision triggered many emotions. I felt very angry at the virus. To date, seven members of my family and countless friends have died from complications of AIDS. I was fearful that I could be next if I developed an opportunistic infection. I became worried that my hectic schedule would interfere with taking the drugs responsibly. Concerned about my body image, I thought about what I would look like if I developed lipodystrophy. Predicting that I would experience side effects, I had severe concerns about how that would affect my daily routine and quality of life.

On my physician's recommendation, I consulted a psychologist. With her help, I was able to sort through, examine and confront the issues. She encouraged me to focus more on the benefits of taking medication as opposed to the challenges. The purpose of taking the HIV medication was to decrease the viral load and possibly increase the CD4 cells, which can result in a prolonged life. In the end that is what is most important to me." 

Marina Alvarez is a Latina AIDS educator and community organizer.

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