

A supplements toolbox

Here's a handy guide to the most popular supplements for PWAs

by Dr. Jennifer Hillier, ND

With all of the products, medications, and therapies available, where do you begin when you want to improve your health? Well, you can start by learning the basics of supplements. Here's a quick guide to the most popular nutritional, vitamin, and mineral supplements used by individuals with HIV/AIDS.

Multivitamins

Multivitamins contain many vitamins and minerals, which help to supplement a healthy diet while supporting a variety of essential body functions. A quality multivitamin is the basis of any supplement regime. When buying a multivitamin, make sure you check labels to compare the quantities of nutrients in each pill or tablet, and how many pills or tablets are suggested per day: some brands are cheaper, but you need to take more of them to achieve the desired dosage.

Fish Oil

(Omega 3 Essential Fatty Acids)

Derived from a variety of fish, including salmon and cod liver, fish oil helps to decrease inflammation and viral activation. Some studies show that it helps regulate the immune system, though others suggest it may be immunosuppressive. Fish oil may also help with depression. This supplement is available in a variety of capsule and liquid formats. It's also available in many flavours—including lemon, orange, and strawberry—if you don't like the fishy taste. For a vegetarian option, try flaxseed oil.

Antioxidant formulas

Antioxidant formulas usually include vitamins A, C, E, and selenium, and may also contain nutrients such as N-acetyl cysteine, coenzyme Q-10, carotenoids, and alpha-lipoic acid. These components help to decrease the damage from aging and HIV, and help reduce inflammation and nerve degeneration. Since HIV uses up more antioxidants, it's important to take a supplement in addition to eating lots of fruits and vegetables, which are also high in antioxidants.

Acetyl L-carnitine

Acetyl L-carnitine helps to reduce the damage done by HIV by increasing good cholesterol and decreasing bad cholesterol, leading to lower blood fats. This nutrient also provides muscles with energy and there is some anecdotal evidence that it may help to prevent and treat peripheral neuropathy and lactic acidosis. This supplement is very expensive if you purchase a pharmaceutical grade; over the counter versions are less reliable because they allegedly contain variable amounts of carnitine.

Alpha-lipoic acid

This is an antioxidant needed in higher quantities especially when there is nerve involvement, such as in peripheral neuropathy and mental changes.

Probiotics

Probiotics contain potentially beneficial bacteria. One of the most common forms is *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, the

bacteria found in yoghurt. Probiotics provide beneficial bacteria to the gut, which can help to decrease diarrhea or infection. They need refrigeration because the bacteria are living organisms and live longer in the cold.

Glutamine

Glutamine is used in the treatment of weight loss, diarrhea, and intestinal upset. It is used as a fuel by the colon and brain, helping the cells to repair and regenerate. It's especially important for your body during acute stress. Since glutamine is an amino acid, it also acts as a building block for muscle and can help decrease muscle wasting, in conjunction with a proper diet. Glutamine is also very costly.

As the word "supplement" suggests, these products should be an adjunct to a healthy diet that includes at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Exercise is also important to help your body maintain muscle mass, elevate your mood, and decrease blood fats. Supplements are only one step in providing your body with what it needs—a healthy mind and spirit are also key factors to long-term wellness. For more detailed and individualized advice, see a naturopathic doctor and start creating your own supplements toolbox. ☉

Dr. Jennifer Hillier, ND, is a naturopathic physician who founded and volunteered for the BCPWA Society's Naturopathic Clinic. She currently practices in Ontario.