

HIV AND NUTRITION: WHAT PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW

By: Charity Wachira

Eating the right type and amount of food in the right combinations is a critical component of comprehensive prevention, care and treatment especially for persons living with HIV. Yet not many people observe their diet due to various reasons. Some people cannot afford proper diet while others are ignorant of the right diet to take.

When the body's immune system breaks down as a result of HIV or AIDS, this usually results to malnutrition and vulnerability to infection. Optimal nutrition, a consumption of the right foods in the right quantities on a regular schedule is also an important component in the response to chronic diseases that are becoming increasingly prevalent among persons living with HIV.

According to USAID, Optimal nutrition and AIDS Nutrition and HIV and AIDS are cyclically related. Malnutrition-related infections often result to diarrhea, malabsorption, poor appetite and weight loss. Consequently, malnutrition is a key contributor towards HIV progression. On the other hand, a person who is well-nourished is more likely to maintain a stronger immune system for coping with the condition and fighting opportunistic infections. Optimal nutrition is an important component in the response to chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, which are common among persons living with HIV.

The KANCO Rongai Drop In Center has been a haven for key and vulnerable populations to access health services since 2009. It started as a youth center dubbed Responding to AIDS among the youth (RAY), which later evolved to a Drop In Center focusing on key populations with an aim to offer comprehensive care services. The DIC has since

been offering services to both male and female sex workers, and recently to drug users in the greater Kajiado region.



The drop in center offers comprehensive care service such as Sexual Reproductive Health which includes Sexually Transmitted Infections screening (STI), Family Planning and cervical cancer screening to Key populations. Other services offered are, TB screening, HIV testing and counseling, treatment for opportunistic infections and nutritional support for People living with HIV as part of their comprehensive care package.

The DIC's health consultant, Fredrick Muturi who works at the Drop in Center says that nutritional assessment is done as part of the initial health evaluation for all clients. This assessment entails the client's subjective and objective observation. The subjective observation is the patient's outward appearance which picks observable characteristics such as abnormalities, facial expressions, hygiene, mental status, nutritional status such as body weight and generally anything outwardly visible. The Objective observation includes the patient's complaints as well as vital sign assessment like temperature, pulse rate, respiration and blood pressure. "HIV by its nature compromises one's immunity and the medication involved has side effects that can affect feeding habits," says the consultant. The assessment also includes body mass index which is done using MUAC tapes. At the DIC,

the clients undergo intensive nutrition evaluation which involves observations of muscle wasting, general weakness, physical examination which may present as paleness presenting on the mouth cavity or in the inside of the lower eyelids.

Muturi further adds that poverty adversely affects many people in Africa which often limits their diets. "Poverty coupled with HIV could lead to Malnutrition," he notes. In HIV cases, Muturi observes, there are also reported incidents of over-nutrition since some people respond to stress by binge eating while some issues arise from medication. Lipodystrophy syndrome which is the irregular distribution of fats as one of the side effects of Anti-Retroviral Therapy, which according to a study by Enfermagem indicates that fat loss and accumulation can occur simultaneously in different regions of the body in the same individual a situation called mixed form in Persons living with HIV.

The Nutritional assessment he says, assesses the weight, height also known as body mass index in adults and children are assessed using the MUAC tapes..

According to the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health; patients living with HIV, antiretroviral treatment is paired with nutritional support maintain optimum nutrition during the symptomatic period. This is to improve the patient's nutritional status during acute episodes of infections and also during the stable symptom free period. "This can be achieved by nutritional assessment, nutritional screening, and nutritional intervention and by providing psychosocial support for nutrition" Muturi observes.