

Faking what you're taking

Drugs and other things you might want to tell your doctor about

by Chrystal Palaty

Does your primary physician doctor know about all the drugs and therapies you're taking?

At the BC Centre for Excellence's (BC-CfE) Fall HIV/Antiretroviral Update in December 2010, Dr. Mark Hull described the results of a study comparing what drugs people were taking versus the ones they actually told their doctor about. It turns out that people don't tell their doctors about the complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) and recreational drugs they were taking. They reported their CAM use less than one-quarter of the time, and recreational drug use about half the time.

Understandably, many people may be reluctant to share details of recreational drug use or alcohol consumption, and may not want to let their doctors know about alternative or herbal therapies for fear they may be ridiculed. This lack of disclosure happens with most diseases and conditions, for example with cancer and asthma, but it can have more serious consequences with HIV/AIDs.

Taking a lot of medications is a way of life for most people who are HIV-positive. In addition to antiretrovirals (ARVs), there are also drugs to manage symptoms and other conditions and diseases.

These different medications have the potential to interact; different drugs can interfere with the absorption, metabolism, or excretion of other drugs. The overall effect is that drugs are either broken down too fast, which means that the effective dose may be ineffective for treatment, or they aren't broken down fast enough, leading to increased side effects or an overdose. Adding CAM or recreational drugs into the mix can really shake things up, if they interfere with your ARVs.

There hasn't been a lot of research to determine how recreational drugs and ARVs interact, so we just don't know the effects of taking these drugs together. In addition, the properties and mechanisms of many complementary and alternative therapies aren't well defined, so we don't know if or how these medicines interfere with ARVs.

Some examples of interactions that are known to occur:

- ▷ St John's wort, an herbal treatment for depression, can interfere with levels of protease inhibitors (PIs) or non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs).
- ▷ PIs such as ritonavir (Norvir) and NNRTIs slow down the enzymes that break down amphetamines like crystal meth or ecstasy, which has resulted in overdoses.
- ▷ PIs and NNRTIs also interfere and reduce the potency of methadone. Methadone may cause nucleosides to build up, increasing side effects; it may also decrease the antiretroviral activity of some ARVs.
- ▷ Combining PIs and sedatives such as triazolam (Halcion), diazepam (Valium), zolpidem (Ambien) or midazolam (Versed) can be deadly.
- ▷ ARVs don't mix with large amounts of alcohol, which impairs the way that drugs are metabolized in the liver. Efavirenz (Sustiva) can interfere with alcohol metabolism, and can make hangovers worse. Combining alcohol and didanosine (Videx) can increase the risk of pancreatitis.

Here are some suggestions to help you prevent interactions between your ARVs and everything else you're taking:

- ▷ Keep a list of medications you're taking including all over-the-counter medications, as well as complementary and alternative medicine. If you're seeing different doctors, give each of them a copy of this list to let them know what others have prescribed for you.
- ▷ Be honest with your primary doctor about what you're taking. Although he or she may not be supportive of your drug use or alternative approaches, he or she may be able to help you anticipate and prevent problems.
- ▷ Be aware of how you feel. If something changes or if you experience a new side effect, see your doctor.

Lastly, educate yourself about potential interactions and side effects. www.thebody.com, and www.aidsinfonet.org are great starting points. ☉

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