HIV and cancers of the immune system

HIV infection damages the immune system and although potent combination anti-HIV therapy, commonly called ART or HAART, is widely available in high-income countries, it can only partially restore the immune system’s competence. As a result, defects in immunity persist. Although life-threatening AIDS-related infections are now uncommon among ART users, their risk for certain cancers is elevated compared to HIV-negative people. This elevated risk among HIV-positive people varies somewhat from person to person but arises from a complex intersection of several factors, likely including at least some of the following:

- prolonged exposure to proteins produced by HIV-infected cells
- certain behaviours such as higher-than-normal rates of smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol and use of other substances
- insufficient exercise
- being overweight
- exposure to certain viruses

In this issue of TreatmentUpdate, we focus on the cancerous impacts of infections from the herpes virus family, such as EBV (Epstein-Barr Virus) and HHV-8 (human herpes virus-8) among HIV-positive people. These viruses are sexually transmitted and relatively common among HIV-positive people. Both herpes viruses have been linked to the development of cancers of the immune system—lymphoma. Our focus will also include reports of successful treatment of such cancers.

— Sean R. Hosein

REFERENCES:


Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

CATIE provides information resources to help people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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Information on safer drug use is presented as a public health service to help people make healthier choices to reduce the spread of HIV, viral hepatitis and other infections. It is not intended to encourage or promote the use or possession of illegal drugs.

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