More than HIV

After 23 years of living with the virus, Valerie Wojciechowicz knows that health care doesn't end with taking her daily dose of HIV meds. Here's her recipe for total wellness.

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Only Halfway Home

"I am grateful for the meds and my doctors. They are important in my medical care. But so am I. The meds keep me alive, but why not manage the rest of my body? Just taking meds is stopping halfway." The rest of the way includes exercise, nutrition, meditation and massage—and building an active network of support.

Working It Out

"Exercise is key to health. When I was diagnosed, HIV combo treatment wasn't available and people were dying from wasting. I figured that with more muscle on my body, wasting wouldn't happen so fast.

"When I started taking meds, I saw that exercise could alleviate some med side effects. For instance, cardio workouts help delay heart-related side effects, and strength training increases bone density. And a stronger body means faster recovery from an illness or surgery. Plus anyone who works out regularly sleeps better and has more energy and better moods—less depression—than an inactive person."

No Gym Bunny

"People tell me, 'I can't work out, the gym is too expensive, I don't have enough time.' I knock the wind out of those arguments." Just start walking, or lift some free weights at home. You needn't change your whole life—just change a few small things about it. You will see and feel the results.

Eat It Up

"'Diet' is a four-letter word. I say 'food plan.' It's what you put in your body every day. Look at what you eat and then adjust. How can I drink one more glass of water a day and one less soda? How can I eat more veggies and fruits daily? Food delivers nutrients that can help you maintain good health."

The First Swallow

"Begin by making a food diary for a week. Write down every single thing you eat—including that last bite of your kid's sandwich and the carrot you ate while you were cooking dinner. You'll see

what needs work.”

Supplementary Insurance

“I see a nutritionist who specializes in HIV. She looks at my lab reports and suggests supplements to help offset side effects—such as supplements to support the health of my liver, because over time taking medications can damage the liver.”

Safety Net

A support network is crucial to HIV health and happiness, but developing it takes work—beyond just telling people you have HIV. “One day I got mad at my mom because she didn’t ask me how my doctor’s appointment went. But she didn’t know what to ask—I hadn’t told her anything except that I have HIV. Now I invite people into my world. I explain the challenges I face, what my lab numbers mean. That makes it possible for them to ask questions. It’s a way of disclosing that helps build the network, instead of just dumping the information and running.”

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