

# Usage, Barriers, and Disclosure of Integrative Medicine by People living with HIV on Antiretroviral Therapy



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# Background & Methods

**Author background:** Devan Nambiar is a PLHIV for 33 years, and the research integrated GIPA, MIPA, and included an emic perspective, and REB approval.

**Research background:** People living with HIV (PLHIV) have been combining antiretroviral therapy (ARV) with Integrative Medicine (IM) for improving their mental,<sup>1,4,9</sup> emotional,<sup>4,9</sup> and physical health and well-being. IM is the coordinated use, intake of a wide range of supplements, herbs, vitamins<sup>11,12</sup>, and practice of mind-body modalities,<sup>3,4,9</sup> and exercises<sup>10,11</sup> with conventional medicine. While ARV is most potent to reduce viral load, ARV does not manage or reduce comorbidities of cardiovascular,<sup>8</sup> bone, renal<sup>8</sup> or liver health, inflammatory conditions<sup>2,8</sup> and mental health for PLHIV.<sup>1,4,9</sup> Secondly, “micronutrients are essential for maintaining proper immunologic functions and reduce oxidative stress and increase oxidative defenses.”<sup>11, 12</sup>

**Methods:** A mixed-method research study describes PLHIV (n=19) using IM with ARV. The qualitative questions covered comorbidities, barriers to access to IM, managing side effects of antiretroviral therapy, and the recommendations from PLHIV on disclosure and usage of IM. Participants are clients of AIDS Service Organizations. They include five cisgender females, and fourteen cisgender males.



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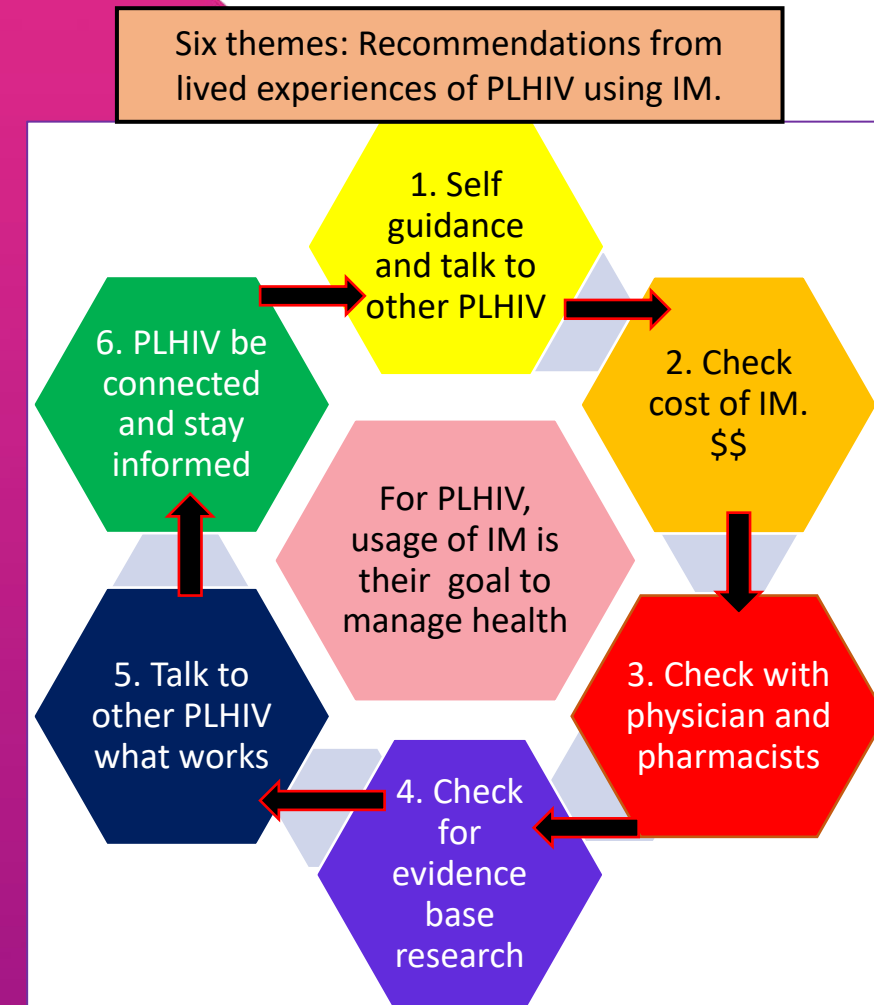
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# Results (N=19)

- A thematic analysis identified six themes and the unique IM usage and practice characteristics amongst PLHIV.
- 17 PLHIV (89 %) disclosed IM use to physicians, but only 31% (n=6) consulted physicians on the type of IM to use. PLHIV consulted their peers 79% (n=15) on best practices of IM.
- Over 74% (n=14) took a multivitamin and supplements, 26% (n=5) took supplements only, and 53% (n=10) used herbs. IM practices highly utilized by PLHIV are massage therapy (n=16, 84%), acupuncture (n=11, 58%), and yoga (n=10, 53%). PLHIV from diverse ethnicities and races used IM from their traditional medicine knowledge to improve their quality of life.
- PLHIV consulted staff at AIDS Service Organizations 58% (N=11) along with friends, family, and practitioners of IM. The research demonstrates the validation and impact of peer knowledge sharing among PLHIV (79%) on the type of IM for maximum efficacy and managing side effects of ARV.
- 74% (N=14) strongly agree with the positive effect of IM on their health, quality of life,<sup>8</sup> and having a positive outlook.
- Participants described IM as effective in decreasing stress and providing a sense of empowerment. *“IM has a positive effect on emotional and mental health. It all combines to enhance my sense of self, mentally and physically.”*



# Discussion

- PLHIV utilizes and shares peer-based knowledge on IM with their peers on how to make informed decisions on the efficacy of IM over the long term
- Over 74 % (N=14) of participants strongly agree IM has a good effect on their health and well-being. The two Canadian studies<sup>5,6</sup> find similar viewpoints held by PLHIV, and it was reported that “77 % report that CAM use” has “improved their overall health”. This research shows that IM usage is essential for maintaining positive mental health and a positive attitude while living with a chronic illness. Recent research<sup>1,2</sup> shows PLHIV have an increased risk for depression, anxiety, mental illness and “despite careful management, HIV infection induces a state of chronic inflammation throughout the body associated with increased inflammatory markers and chronic immune activation, and, notably, chronic activation of CD8+ T cells” and cardiovascular disease.
- Many PLHIV have experienced chronic illness due to an immune-compromised immune system and had to make difficult decisions. These difficult circumstances have helped them prioritize health and vitality by integrating IM for their well-being. In 2022 and beyond, researchers and healthcare providers need to pay attention to the benefits of IM usage. Further research is critically required to explore the role of IM in the lives of the PLHIV and the aging PLHIV.

*“Approach integrative medicine with the word balance in mind.”*

*“Do your research, listen to all but in the end know your body well enough to decide if something will be of benefit to you.”*

*“I would recommend talking to another PLHIV who are on the same anti-viral medication that you are on because they can explain their lived experience of the Integrative Medicine.”*

*“I personally talk to physicians, pharmacists to make sure nothing will counteract.”*

# References & Acknowledgement

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