

Deanna: Exercise can transform you

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Eight years ago Deanna was overweight and having trouble with antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). Becoming pregnant was the impetus for a change in how she approached managing her health. Deanna transformed her body shape and health through exercise. Now she works a personal trainer and runs fitness programs for other people with HIV.

Deanna looks like she should be in gym advertisements. Things weren't always this way; her changes towards healthier living developed over a long period. 'It's been progressive. I was infected and diagnosed with HIV in 1994. I was 26 kilos heavier than now. My lifestyle wasn't good, I was drinking a lot, not watching what I was eating, and I wasn't doing any sport.'

A change came when Deanna fell pregnant. 'When you've got someone relying on you it's essential to look after yourself. I started eating organic food and walking. But I was also wasting a lot.'

Later, side effects from treatments were becoming a problem. 'I was getting abdominal obesity and signs of lipodystrophy, my legs were thinning, my waist was getting heavier. Also, I was in a horrible place mentally. I had no control over what I was doing or the [virus](#) [1]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell.'

'I had a relationship break-up and I felt I needed to completely change my life around. A friend looked fantastic, she's positive as well. I asked 'what are you doing?' and she said 'I've got a personal trainer' and I said 'give me the number'. That's what started the shift in reclaiming my body.'

Deanna believes finding the right trainer made the difference 'I'd done the gym thing before and not succeeded. But I told him what I wanted and he made that happen for me.'

'I started off seeing him once a week, then twice a week. I did a bit of running, cycling and walking, not excessive. And that sort of exercise was enough to make changes in my body. Weight training made me feel strong, my body shape changed. My body image was better. Feeling strong let me feel like I was in control. I went from 700 to 1400 T cells.'

Deanna became passionate about exercise and studied to become a personal trainer. Now she runs fitness programs at the Melbourne Positive Living Centre.

Finding the motivation to make a start on an exercise program can be hard for some, but Deanna has noticed that once people have started, the small changes they notice become an incentive to go on. 'It's easy to sit at home and use the virus as an excuse to not be bothered. You can blame the virus for lots of things. But, if you are depressed, fatigued, or lethargic, exercise can move you in the right direction. It just means making a start, once you start, you see the changes.'

In 2006, Ian Coutts ran the Living Positively Project, which was based at the Melbourne Positive Living Centre. Ian worked as a health coach, providing one-on-one coaching support to people with HIV in relation to exercise, diet, and stopping smoking. Ian says that many participants in the project had experiences like Deanna's, greatly surpassing their initial goals. He said, 'I believe that this is due to the confidence and satisfaction that is felt when someone realises a goal that they set out to achieve. Goal setting can be a great tool to help get you motivated. It enables you to set priorities, gives you a path to follow and it can help you visualise and plan actions to help you achieve what you want. It can provide a positive focus of energy and also help you keep on track. Many of the participants in the project found that setting goals and regularly reviewing and monitoring them resulted in increased self-confidence and provided a sense of achievement.'

If you don't think you want to become a fitness instructor, the good news is that Deanna says a little effort can go a long way. 'If you're with someone who knows what they're doing, a good half-hour session twice a week is all you need. To be a body builder needs more, but if you just want to improve your health, that's enough.'

'One guy has been coming since I started the program. He's seen big changes. He never wore shorts because his legs were weedy. He's now got beautiful legs, his whole body is proportioned and he swears by the exercise. He's here every week, others come and go around him but he's a work in progress.'

'He's the fittest and healthiest he's been in his whole life. He was diagnosed about eleven years ago and he's 60 and says he never had so much energy in his life.'

Deanna has learnt a lot about food, and although she watches what she eats, she keeps this in balance. 'I feed myself now to fuel my body as opposed to just eat. I'm also human and do enjoy my occasional glass of wine and ice cream and all that. I've got a 19 meals out of 21 rule: if 19 meals in a week are good, then for two I'll cut loose.'

'HIV made me realise I've got to treat my body right. I keep my body in tip-topshape because of the HIV. I eat organic foods and take high quality supplementation. It's not cheap.'

Deanna thinks the expense is worth it. 'People will open a bag of chips and smoke a cigarette. That's expensive. I've got two children, you can't put a price on health. I can't afford to be sick.'

Ingrid Cullen is a fitness instructor with many years' experience of working with people with HIV. Many of Ingrid's clients are living on pensions. 'Gyms are bloody dear. So is personal training expertise. That's probably more important, the personal instruction. It's hard to get people that know what they're doing. A lot of gyms don't provide much back-up. And the people that are giving the advice tend to be very inexperienced. There's plenty you can do without a gym. I write articles in Talkaboutabout things you can do at home.'

In Sydney and Melbourne there are programs available that provide specialist advice and support for people with HIV who want to exercise more.

Managing HIV. It's about [balance](#) [2].

- [living with HIV](#)
- [exercise](#)
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Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>

[2] <http://www.napwa.org.au/hivbalance>