Back and Forth

Can you return to just being HIV positive after progressing to AIDS?

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OK, so you're healthy again after being diagnosed with AIDS. Are you now just someone living with HIV?

First, it's important to know there are three stages of HIV infection. The first is acute infection, when the body produces large amounts of the virus and triggers flu-like symptoms in many, but not all, people. The second is when the body reproduces very low levels of HIV, a stage called clinical latency. "During this period, you may not have symptoms," explain HIV experts, and "with proper treatment, people may live with clinical latency for several decades." Without treatment, HIV progresses to AIDS. This is the third stage, when the body's infection-fighting CD4 cells (a.k.a. T-cells) dip below 200.

"This is the stage of HIV infection that occurs when your immune system is badly damaged and you become vulnerable to opportunistic infections," experts explain. What's more, if you develop one or more of these opportunistic infections, you are considered to have progressed to AIDS regardless of how high your CD4 count is.

In addition, sometimes an HIV- positive person can be diagnosed with AIDS if his or her immune system becomes severely weakened, even without one of these infections, or certain cancers, occurring.

But to answer the opening question, public health officials at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs say, "Once a person has been diagnosed with AIDS, she or he is always considered to have AIDS, even if that person's CD4 count goes up again or they recover from the disease that defined their AIDS diagnosis."

Still, perhaps what's worth stressing isn't the previous discussion. What's even more key is that if you've been diagnosed with HIV, you see a doctor and get into care.

When it comes to HIV, doctors stress antiretroviral (ARV) therapy to stop the virus from progressing to AIDS. Say the experts, ARVs help "control the virus so that you can live a longer, healthier life and reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to others."

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