

In Nairobi, treating HIV on an empty stomach

by [Chris Herlinger](#)
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Nairobi, Kenya, November 30 (ENInews)--Dealing with HIV infection is hard enough, but the rise in food prices throughout the Horn of Africa has produced a new problem -- treating HIV on an empty stomach.

"When you take the (anti-viral) medicine and you don't eat, you shake," said Joan Ochieng, 41, a single mother who like others in the Kiamaiko section of Nairobi is faced with feeding herself and her family on less food while sticking to a drug regimen to combat the virus that can lead to AIDS.

A severe increase in food prices is taking a serious toll throughout Kenya and neighboring countries but is being keenly felt in particular in poor neighborhoods with high rates of HIV infection and tuberculosis. The price of rice, for example, has more than doubled in six months, from 50 Kenyan schillings per kilo to 120 Kenyan schillings (an increase of about US 50 cents to US \$1.35).

With families having to skip or spread out meals over a day's or week's time, the results are often painful for those taking the anti-viral medicines, which are government-subsidized and for optimum effect need to be taken on a full stomach. If she hasn't eaten, Ochieng, a street vendor, said she feels sick or nauseous after taking her medicines.

This is common, said Rose Omiä, a Nairobi health worker, who added that some people being treated for HIV are forgoing their anti-viral medicines because of the side effects, like gastric pain, that come with not having enough food when they take the drugs.

Ochieng said that meat is a rarity these days; dinner is more likely to be a small bowl of porridge. The situation has led to a great deal of pessimism, Ochieng said, with many feeling that the situation is "out of our control. We leave it to God."

The Rev. Paulino Mondo, a parish priest at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi's Kariobangi section, whose church's social outreach work is in part funded by the U.S.-based humanitarian agency Catholic Relief Services, said the rise in food prices could lead to frustration and violence, given the extremes people find themselves experiencing.

"You have to give people an alternative -- life without such violence," Mondo said in a recent interview. "But the food crisis is turning everything upside down."