



## HIV/AIDS

### The Issue

It has been more than 20 years since HIV/AIDS was first diagnosed in Canada. Still, thousands of Canadians are infected each year. AIDS is a deadly disease. There is no cure, nor is there a vaccine to prevent infection. But, HIV infection is largely preventable.

### Background

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This is the virus that leads to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV cannot survive outside of the body. For you to be infected, the virus must enter your bloodstream.

HIV is transmitted through:

- unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, oral)
- shared needles or equipment for injecting drugs
- unsterilized needles for tattooing, skin piercing or acupuncture
- pregnancy, delivery and breast feeding (from an HIV infected mother to her infant)
- occupational exposure in health care settings

Over a period of years, HIV weakens the body's immune system to the point where it can no longer fight infection. On average, it takes 10 years to progress from an initial HIV infection to AIDS. People with HIV can live for a number of

years with no external sign or symptom of the disease, and may unknowingly infect others. The only way to know if you have the virus is to have an HIV blood test.

When the body can no longer fight infection, the disease is known as AIDS. The infections associated with AIDS are called "opportunistic" because they take advantage of the body's weakened immune system. It is the opportunistic infection, and not AIDS, that causes death.

In the 1980s, the HIV epidemic primarily affected men who have sex with men (MSM) and those who received blood and blood products. MSM continue to make up the greatest number of new HIV infections, but the number infected in all risk groups remains high. Also, the Aboriginal community continues to be over-represented in Canada's HIV epidemic.

At the end of 2002, Health Canada estimated there were approximately 56,000 people in Canada living with HIV (including those living with AIDS), and that approximately 17,000 or 30% were not aware that they were infected.

### Treating HIV/AIDS

Advances in treatment have helped prolong the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS and improve their quality of life. Although there are treatments, there is still no cure for HIV infection.



It can be difficult for those who are infected with HIV to find a drug regimen that works for them. There are often drug-related side effects that greatly reduce their quality of life. Long term use of drug therapies can also cause organ damage, heart disease, diabetes and other health problems. Moreover, some treatments are beginning to fail because of drug resistance by new strains of the virus.

The bottom line is that AIDS is a deadly disease. Prevention is the only answer until a cure or vaccine is developed.

## Minimizing Your Risk

The HIV/AIDS virus can be transmitted from body to body through blood, semen, pre-ejaculate, vaginal secretions and breast milk. There are several steps you can take to reduce your risk of HIV infection:

- Use latex condoms to make sexual activity safer.
- Postpone or abstain from sexual activities and reduce your number of partners.
- Discuss HIV with your partner and have sex only with a partner who agrees to use a latex condom.
- Never share needles or injection equipment.
- If you are getting a tattoo, body piercing or acupuncture, ensure that all equipment is sterile.

- If you are pregnant and concerned about HIV, talk with your doctor about being tested. Early treatment with medication can prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to baby before birth.
- If you have engaged in risky behaviour, get tested.

Remember, the only way to be 100 percent safe is to not engage in sexual or other activities where body fluids are exchanged.

## Government of Canada's Role

The Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS provides annual ongoing federal funding of \$42.2 million. The Strategy provides a framework for national cooperation in tackling the epidemic. It engages HIV/AIDS stakeholders across the country, including people living with HIV/AIDS, community based health and social service agencies, researchers, national non-government organizations, and all levels of government.

## Need More Info?

Visit Health Canada's HIV/AIDS Web site for additional information on the Strategy and its partners:  
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/diseases/aids.html>

See the fact sheet on Women and HIV/AIDS at:  
[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/women/facts\\_issues/facts\\_aids.htm](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/women/facts_issues/facts_aids.htm)

Go to the Canadian Health Network at:  
<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca>  
and click on HIV/AIDS

Find more information at the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE) at:  
<http://www.catie.ca/>

See the Canadian HIV/AIDS Information Centre for more at:  
<http://www.clearinghouse.cpha.ca>

For international based information go to the following sites:

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS  
<http://www.unaids.org/en/default.asp>

World Health Organisation's HIV/AIDS Web site  
<http://www.who.int/health-topics/hiv.htm>

Additional It's Your Health articles can be found at:  
[www.healthcanada.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.ca/iyh)  
You can also call (613) 957-2991