



HIV/AIDS – A fact sheet

What is HIV/AIDS?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV attacks the immune system, resulting in a chronic, progressive illness that makes infected people vulnerable to infections and cancers. Although there are treatments available for AIDS, there is no cure. AIDS is fatal.¹

How can you get HIV?

According to Health Canada, HIV is transmitted through the following:

- 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.

It is not transmitted through the following:

- Casual, everyday contact.
- Shaking hands, hugging, kissing.
- Coughs, sneezes.

- Giving blood.
- Swimming pools, toilet seats.
- Sharing eating utensils, water fountains.
- Mosquitoes, other insects, or animals.

HIV infection and First Nations, Inuit and Métis

HIV infection rates are on the rise among First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis are a young and growing population. The median age of the Inuit population is 22 years old, 25 years old for First Nations and 30 years old for Métis. The median age for the non-Aboriginal population is 40 years old.²

This is extremely important because HIV diagnosis among First Nations, Inuit and Métis is occurring at much younger ages than among the non-Aboriginal population.

Almost a third (32.4 per cent) of positive HIV test reports from Aboriginal persons from 1998 to the end of 2006 were younger than 30-years-old, compared to 21 per cent of this age among infected non-Aboriginal persons.³

Not only is HIV/AIDS a concern for our young people, but it is having a significant impact on First Nations, Inuit and Métis women. During 1998-2006, First Nations, Inuit and Métis women represented 48.1 per cent of all positive HIV test reports compared to 20.7 per cent of reports among non-Aboriginal persons.⁴

First Nations, Inuit and Métis individuals, families and communities are affected by this growing health concern. As such there is a need to support those individuals living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Why are First Nations, Inuit and Métis becoming infected with HIV/AIDS?

First Nations, Inuit and Métis people are especially vulnerable to HIV infection because compared to the general Canadian population, they have poor access to health services and higher rates of poverty, substance abuse, intravenous drug use, and tattooing.

These issues are closely connected to the determinants of health.

Additionally, rates of sexually transmitted infections are very high among First Nations, Inuit and Métis. These



indicators suggest a higher level of unprotected sex among First Nations, Inuit and Métis, which would put them at an increased risk of contracting HIV.

Almost 60 per cent of HIV infections among Aboriginal people between 1998 and 2005 were attributable to intravenous drug use, compared with 25.7 per cent of non-Aboriginal people during the same period.⁵

Important facts to remember

- The most common mode of HIV transmission among First Nations, Inuit and Métis is injecting drug use.
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis women make up a large part of the HIV epidemic in their community.

- First Nations, Inuit and Métis diagnosed with HIV appear to be infected at a younger age than non-Aboriginal people.
- By the end of 2005, there were 58,000 people in Canada living with HIV (including AIDS)—a 16 per cent increase from 2002. Of these, it is estimated that 27 per cent are not aware of their infection.⁶

Gaps in information

There is currently not enough data to measure the full extent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations in Canada. HIV and AIDS surveillance for these populations is incomplete.

One reason for this is that not all provinces collect ethnicity data. Among the provinces and territories that do collect

this data, there can be variations in how ethnicity is reported, misclassification of ethnic status and delays in reporting.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis represent six per cent of the population in Canada. A large percentage of this population is concentrated in the territories and western provinces. Ethnic information on positive HIV test reports is well reported for these provinces. Ontario and Quebec, provinces that do not provide ethnic information, account for 27.4 per cent of Canadians who self-identify as Aboriginal⁷, and this represents 1.5 per cent of the population of these provinces.

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- 1 Health Canada. (2008). HIV and Aids. In *Diseases and Conditions*. Retrieved April 9, 2009 from <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dc-ma/aids-sida/index-eng.php>.
- 2 Statistics Canada. (2006). Aboriginal peoples. In *Aboriginal Population Profile, 2006 Census*. Retrieved April 3, 2009 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/rt-td/ap-pa-eng.cfm>.3 <http://www.hpvinfos.ca/hpvinfos/parents/vaccination-2.aspx>, 2009
- 4 Public Health Agency of Canada. HIV/AIDS Epi Updates, November 2007, Surveillance and Risk Assessment Division, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007.
- 5 Public Health Agency of Canada. HIV/AIDS Epi Updates, November 2007, Surveillance and Risk Assessment Division, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007.
- 6 Public Health Agency of Canada. HIV/AIDS Epi Updates, November 2007, Surveillance and Risk Assessment Division, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007.
- 7 Statistics Canada (2001). *2001 Census Aboriginal Population Profiles*. Retrieved April 2, 2009 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/AP01/Index.cfm?Lang=E>.



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