

# HIV / AIDS

## *What's the Big Deal?*



### **Forgotten but not gone.**

You don't hear much about HIV/AIDS in Canada these days. That might make you think that it's not such a big deal anymore. But think again. AIDS is still a fatal disease. And it's still very much among us.

### **Treatment is not a cure.**

Some people think the HIV/AIDS drugs they've hear about have pretty much beaten the disease. Some even think there's a cure. But that's simply not true.

Some people with HIV can be treated with drugs and for some, the drugs can significantly prolong life and improve its quality.

There can be serious side effects, however, including increased risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and increased cholesterol.

For some people the drugs just don't help much. There are also drug-resistant strains of HIV in North America that don't respond to drug treatment at all.

Viruses are notoriously hard to cure. We don't even have a cure for the common cold yet, and HIV is a very rapidly mutating virus. A cure may be a very long way off.

### **You can't tell who is infected, even if they've been tested.**

People who are infected with HIV remain symptomless for several years. They can appear healthy for a decade or more before they begin to realize there is anything wrong. They may see no reason to get tested. Yet all this time they are infectious.

The HIV test commonly used in Canada tests only for antibodies to HIV, not for the virus itself. It can take two to six months for the antibodies to grow to a measurable level after infection occurs. That means that an HIV test today may only indicate your HIV status **six months ago**. If you've been exposed to the

virus since that time, you could be infected with HIV and still test negative.

Because HIV has a long symptomless period, about 1/3 of people living with HIV in Canada don't know they're infected. And if they don't know they're infected, they can't tell you, can they?

### **How do you know you're not infected?**

You can only know for sure that you're not infected if you've never engaged in any risky behaviours – sharing needles (even for tattooing or piercing) or engaging in unprotected anal or vaginal sex. (Oral sex is considered low risk for HIV transmission, although it can transmit other STIs such as herpes and gonorrhea.)

You can get an HIV antibody test and have it repeated in six months time. If both tests are negative and you have not engaged in any risk behaviours since the first test, then you know you're uninfected. Because you can only know your own risk behaviours for sure, it's still important to practice safer sex.

## But what if I'm married or in a monogamous relationship?

HIV does not discriminate. If you are in a relationship that is truly mutually monogamous and you have both tested negative over six months and had no risk behaviours since the first test, you can probably count on being uninfected.

The problem is that if you're not tested, you could be infected through other people in your – or your partner's – distant past and not know it. For example, you can't possibly know your partner's last partner's, last partner's, last partner's needle sharing or sexual history.

And let's not be naive. The leading cause of the breakup of relationships is infidelity. Not everyone who thinks they're in a mutually monogamous relationship actually is.

Condoms protect against HIV. Wedding rings don't. Some married people do get HIV.



## Protect yourself and your loved ones

Because you can't know for certain that someone is not infected with HIV, you need to protect yourself all the time. How do you do that?

Abstinence and mutual monogamy, of course, are great defenses against HIV – depending on what those terms mean to you. Some people consider themselves abstinent even though they have oral or anal sex.

And unprotected anal sex is the very riskiest sexual behaviour there is for transmitting HIV. So when someone tells you they've been abstinent, you need to find out exactly what they mean by that.

Latex and polyurethane condoms are not foolproof, but with correct, consistent use, they provide excellent protection against HIV (and many other STIs). Research shows that most people readily agree to use a condom when asked by their partner.

Make sure you use a good water-based lubricant with condoms to reduce the friction that can cause breakage.

Familiarize yourself with how to use condoms correctly, and practice before you get into a sexual encounter with a partner. Then use them every time.

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## Resources for more information

[www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo](http://www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo) – University of Alberta Health Information web site with information and interactive learning resources.

[www.goaskalice.com](http://www.goaskalice.com) – Columbia University's excellent question and answer site.

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca) – Great information from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada.

Capital Health STD Centre

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) – Health Canada's web site

### Thanks to the following for reviewing this publication:

Dr. Gordon McInroy, M.B. Ch.B. D(OBST) R.C.O.G.

Dr. Barbara Romanowski, MD, FRCP, FACP

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