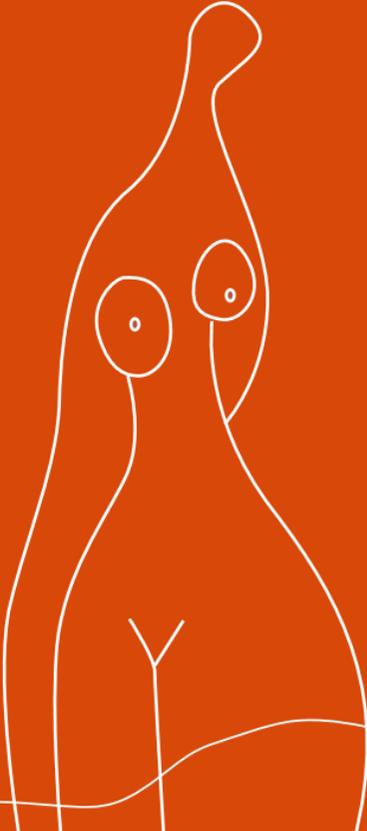


this virus doesn't
care about anyone's
age, race, culture,
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or sex

Women & HIV



Women & HIV



When it comes to HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), any woman can get infected if she is involved in risky activities. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)... and this virus doesn't care about anyone's age, race, culture, orientation, religion or sex.

The good news is that infection with HIV is 100% preventable! Knowing the facts and the risks will help you reduce your chances of getting infected.

What are risky activities?

HIV is passed directly from one person to another through blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breast milk. There are three main ways you can get it: by having unprotected sex (without a condom or other protection) with an infected person; by sharing needles or 'works' with someone who has the virus; or by being born to or breastfed by, a woman who has HIV.

The most common ways for women in Canada to become infected are through unprotected heterosexual sexual activity or by sharing needles.

When Helen and Robert first met, they talked about everything except the fact that three years ago, he had shot up drugs and used someone else's needles. This behaviour put him at risk for being infected with HIV. When Helen and Robert had unsafe sex, she was taking a bigger chance than she realized.

Drugs:

If you shoot drugs, you can become infected if you share a needle, syringe, cooker, or other 'works' with a person who is infected. A shared needle is a direct link between someone else's infected blood and your bloodstream.

Sex:

You risk getting HIV if you have vaginal sex (intercourse, penis in the vagina) without a condom. You are at even greater risk if you have anal sex (penis in the bum) without a condom, because the tissue around the anus tears more easily than the tissue of the vagina. Oral sex (when the mouth is in contact with genitals) without a condom or dental dam is less risky than unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse, but a few people have become infected with HIV in this way. During her period, an HIV-positive woman may be more likely to transmit the virus to others due to the presence of blood.

Most woman-to-woman sexual contact (e.g. oral sex, using toys, rubbing genitals together) is considered to be low risk. However, lesbian women, or women in same-sex relationships, who have had male partners, have used injection drugs, have had heterosexual sex to become pregnant, or have had artificial insemination with semen from an unscreened donor, may have become infected with HIV.





What About Testing?

You have to ask specifically for an HIV test – no one is able to test your blood for HIV without your permission. The HIV test does not detect the virus. It looks for antibodies in your blood which your body makes to fight disease. It can take up to three months from the time of infection for your body to produce enough antibodies to be detectable by the HIV test, which is a simple blood test. So, in order to have an accurate test, you need to be tested at least three months after you last had unprotected sex or shared needles.

A 'negative' HIV test result indicates that no HIV antibodies were found in your blood. This can mean that you are not infected, or that you are infected but that not enough antibodies have been produced yet. A 'positive' HIV test result means that you may have HIV. If you test positive on an HIV test, another test is usually performed to confirm whether or not you are infected with HIV. It is good to know your HIV status so that you can protect others and get proper care and support.

Can You Tell If Someone Is Infected?

A person who is infected with HIV does not look any different. Most people who have a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including HIV, have no noticeable symptoms.

After living together for three years, Janet and Stephanie broke up. That's when Janet found out that Stephanie had been having sex with men — unprotected sex — before and during their relationship. She realized that Stephanie could have been infected and she might have been exposed to the virus.

The past behaviour of your sex partners may be a risk for you. A direct question to your partner does not guarantee a correct answer, because many people who are infected with HIV do not know it themselves. And even if they have taken risks in the past, they may not be comfortable talking about it. Stigma and discrimination are major obstacles to effective HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Fear of discrimination prevents people from seeking HIV testing and treatment, or from acknowledging their HIV status publicly. Thousands of HIV-positive Canadians face HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

If you are with a new partner, or if you have been separated from your partner and then get back together, it's best to assume that you are at risk. You should practise safer sex (use condoms or dental dams) for at least three months, at which time you can both be tested for HIV.

What's safer sex?

Because you can't be sure who has HIV and who doesn't, many women protect themselves at all times and with all partners.

Women are more likely to protect themselves from pregnancy using methods that do not depend on partner co-operation, such as oral contraceptives. But the pill and most other methods of birth control will not protect you from HIV or other STIs.

There are ways of having safer sex, where the risk of getting an infection from your partner is reduced. The most common safer sex measure is to use a condom for any penetrative sex — like vaginal or anal intercourse and for oral sex.

A latex condom is the best protection. (Polyurethane male and female condoms are also available, but they are expensive and sometimes hard to find.) You can use condoms for vaginal, anal, or oral sex. It is safe to stop using condoms only if both partners test negative for HIV and other STIs, and only if both do not have any other sex partners or share needles with others.

Before Pauline had sex with David, they talked about using condoms. Pauline bought condoms and they used them the first few times they made love. Then David confronted Pauline, saying, "You know I really care about you, and you know I'm clean. Come on, we don't need condoms any more. Trust me." Pauline insisted that they both get tested before deciding to stop using safer sex.

Try buying your own condoms and learning how to use them (see instructions later in this pamphlet). Talk to your friends. Think about ways in which you might raise the subject of condoms with a partner. Figure out what you would say to a partner who gives you a hard time about using condoms.

- **Guy:** "Don't you trust me?"
You: "I do trust you, but either of us could have the virus and not know it."
- **Guy:** "Condoms don't feel as good!"
You: "Let's try it a few times. It'll be more fun if I feel safer and can relax. Let's put a drop of lubricant in the inside tip of the condom so you can feel more sensation."
- **Guy:** "Condoms are too small for me."
You: "If it can fit over my hand and arm (demonstrate), it can fit on your penis!"

Even though oral sex is low risk for HIV infection, protected oral sex reduces the risk of getting HIV and other STIs even more. To have protected oral sex, use a condom when your mouth is in contact with the penis (fellatio) or use a dental dam when your mouth is in contact with the vulva and vagina (cunnilingus).

(Dental dams are thin latex sheets and are available from some public health units, pharmacies and specialty condom shops. If you cannot obtain a dental dam, you can make one by cutting a non-lubricated condom lengthwise.)

If you have unprotected oral sex, it is better not to floss your teeth for 30 minutes before having unprotected oral sex (flossing causes small cuts in the mouth which can be a way for viruses to get into your bloodstream). For similar reasons, you should wait at least 12-24 hours after having dental work before having unprotected oral sex.

Sex toys (dildos, vibrators, butt plugs) that are not shared pose no risk of passing on HIV. But if toys are used by more than one person, there can be a small risk of passing the virus from one person to another. This risk can be greatly reduced by covering the toy with a new condom before each person uses it, or by disinfecting it properly between uses (most toys can be washed thoroughly with soap and warm water – a pamphlet entitled “Sex Toy Stories, published by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Information Centre, has more information about caring for sex toys. See contact information at the end of this pamphlet).

You can choose not to have any penetration or intercourse at all, and find pleasure instead in massage, hugging, fingering, petting, mutual masturbation, erotic fantasizing, etc. These activities are sometimes called “outercourse”.

What’s safer shooting?

If you shoot drugs, use a new needle every time. Have your own works and don’t share them, and learn how to inject yourself. If you find yourself in a situation where no new needle is available, you can clean your works with clean water and bleach as a last resort. Make sure you know where to go to access local needle-exchange programs.

Remember that alcohol and drugs make it harder to think and act clearly. They lead to situations that you may not be able to handle and that can put you at risk for infection with HIV or other STIs. Most of us make different decisions under the influence than we would make sober.





What about having a baby?

If you are planning on having a baby, you and your partner may want to consider having an HIV test first, as the results may influence your decision to get pregnant. If you have a male partner and he is infected with HIV, you will risk getting infected when you have unprotected sex in order to get pregnant.

And if you are HIV positive, you can pass the infection on to your baby during pregnancy, at birth or while breastfeeding. About one baby in four born to an HIV-positive woman in Canada gets infected with the virus. There are anti-HIV medications that can substantially reduce the chance of passing the virus to the baby.

You cannot predict whether a new baby

will have HIV, but if you know about your own HIV status, you can make your own decision about whether you have enough support from family and friends to get pregnant and take on the responsibilities of having a child. It is important to know for you to plan to have proper support and medical care throughout your pregnancy.

Some women get pregnant through the use of alternative reproductive technologies, like artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization. In Canada, there are uniform national standards and guidelines which help to decrease the risk of getting infectious diseases, like HIV, through semen that has been donated to a fertility service. Whether you are using sperm from a sperm bank or from a known donor, make sure that the donor undergoes rigorous screening for medical and genetic diseases and all sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

What do I want?

Whether you are 14 or 64 years old, you may find yourself talking about condoms or dental dams with your partner for the first time. It can be difficult, funny or embarrassing. It can bring you closer together, or it can split you apart. But if you feel comfortable enough to have sex with your partner, you should feel comfortable enough to talk about safety first.

Mary was married for sixteen years before her divorce. She hadn't been with another man in eighteen years. Although she knew about STIs and HIV, and the importance of condom use, she didn't feel comfortable talking about condoms with a man. One night, she met Richard. After a few drinks made her feel more relaxed, they had a one-night stand. No condoms were used, and she became infected.

You have the right to tell your partner that you don't want to have sex unless it's 'safer sex'. You can choose to 'play safe' by using condoms, dental dams, or by avoiding penetration. You have the right to decide whether to have sex, what level of risk you take and what sexual activities are right for you.

If your partner doesn't care or doesn't want to use safer sex methods, then think twice about having sex. Your feelings are important. And your health might be at stake. If you don't feel like you have choices in your relationship with your partner, you can get support from a counselor or group in your community.

What if I'm HIV positive?

If you have tested positive for HIV, you have lots to think about. Due to new treatments and better care, people with HIV are living longer and healthier than before. By having good medical and social support networks and by taking responsibility for your health, you can maintain your health and live a more satisfying life.

You can still be sexually active with HIV and learn how to protect your partner(s). Be aware of your rights (to privacy and confidentiality) and your responsibilities (to disclose your HIV status to someone prior to any risky behaviour like unprotected sex or sharing needles).

It's important to get the information you need to make your choices. There are networks developed by HIV-positive women – get in touch with one through a local AIDS organization or health clinic.

CONDOMS HELP PROTECT YOUR AND YOUR PARTNER FROM STIS AND HIV



The Male Condom

- Use latex or polyurethane condoms
- Check the expiry date on the package
- Heat and friction can damage condoms — keep them in a purse or jacket pocket (not in a wallet or back pocket)
- Open the condom package carefully to avoid tearing
- Either partner can put the condom on the penis before any genital contact
- A drop of lubricant inside the tip of the condom will improve sensation
- Pinch the air from the tip of the condom to leave space for the semen (cum) — air left in the condom tip can cause it to burst
- Unroll the condom right down to the base of the erect penis
- Use a water-based lubricant to prevent the condom from breaking — avoid Vaseline® and oil-based products
- After ejaculating (cumming), pull out the penis while it is still hard, firmly holding the condom at the base of the condom
- Remove the condom, being careful not to spill semen
- Throw it in the garbage, not the toilet
- Use condoms only once



The Female Condom

Open End (Outer Ring)

Closed End (Inner Ring)

- The open end covers the area around the opening of the vagina. The inner ring is used for insertion, and to help hold the sheath in place.
- Hold the sheath
 - a. Hold inner ring between thumb and middle finger.
 - b. Squeeze.
 - c. Insert the inner ring into the vagina.
- Insert the sheath
Insert the sheath as far as it will go. It's in the right place when you can't feel it. Don't worry – it can't go too far, and it shouldn't hurt.
- Make sure placement is correct
Make sure the sheath is not twisted. The outer ring should be outside the vagina.
- Removal
Remove before standing up. Squeeze and twist the outer ring. Pull out gently. Throw it in the garbage, not in the toilet.
- Use condoms only once.

It's Worth Knowing the Facts...

Living with the reality of HIV is a challenge to all of us. Think about it. Learn about it. Decide what your own needs are. Talk with friends. Talk to your partner. Practise safer sex methods.

Do everything you can to avoid having sex or taking drugs with people who won't respect your right to make safe decisions. There are no second chances with HIV.

For more information about HIV and other STIs call your local:

- public health unit, community health centre or CLSC
- health care provider
- women's support service
- family planning clinic
- AIDS committee or AIDS hotline

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HIV/AIDS HOTLINES

Alberta	1-800-772-2437
British Columbia	1-800-994-4337
Manitoba	1-800-782-2437
Newfoundland and Labrador	1-800-563-1575
New Brunswick	1-800-561-4009
Northwest Territories	1-800-661-0844
Nunavut	1-800-661-0795
Eastern Arctic	1-800-661-0795
Nova Scotia	1-800-566-2437
Ontario: English:	1-800-668-2437
Français:	1-800-267-7432
Prince Edward Island	1-800-314-2437
Quebec	1-888-855-7432
Hotline for women living with HIV/AIDS in Quebec:	1-866-240-0090
Saskatchewan	1-800-667-6876
Yukon	1-800-661-0408, x 8323

For more copies of this brochure or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact

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Tel: 877-999-7740 **Fax:** 613-725-1205

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