

Youth

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Is HIV an issue for Canadian youth?

In Canada, the spread of HIV is steadily increasing among youth. In fact, most of the people profiled in the Stories section of this Web site contracted HIV when they were in their late teens or early 20s.

Adolescence is a time where many behaviour patterns are established that will affect a young person's risk of HIV/STI infection. It is important, then, for young people to have access to information and services to promote healthy decision-making.

Statistics

According to UNICEF, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 account for half of all new cases of HIV around the world.

As of December 2000, there were 12,564 positive HIV tests among youth 15-29 in Canada. This represents 29% of all positive HIV tests in Canada. Females in this age group represent a rising proportion among both positive HIV test reports and reported AIDS diagnoses.

HIV risk

Anyone is at risk for HIV – it depends on what you DO rather than who you ARE. Specifically, high-risk behaviours put people at risk for HIV, including unprotected intercourse and sharing needles. In addition, there are several

factors – biological, social, economic, and cultural – that put young people at additional risk for HIV and other STIs.

Biology

- Young people between ages 15 and 19 have the highest rate of STIs in Canada. Since STIs are a marker for unprotected sex, this puts them at risk for HIV. Open sores, in particular, provide easy points of entry for virus.
- Young women have less vaginal fluids than mature women. This makes vaginal intercourse “drier” and delicate tissue more likely to tear. HIV can easily enter the body through these tiny tears.

Street-Involvement

- Street-involved youth begin to have sexual intercourse at a relatively young age. The median age at first intercourse for street-involved youth ranges from 12 to 15 years of age.
- Street-involved youth don’t always use protective methods, like condoms, when having intercourse. A 1993 study of Ottawa street youth found that only 27% of boys and 8% of girls aged 15 to 20 years reported condom use in the last year.
- Street-involved youth may have sex, including unprotected intercourse, for money, housing, food and other basic needs. STI/HIV prevention may be secondary to meeting these basic needs.
- Street-involved youth sometimes use alcohol and/or drugs, including injection drugs. Youth who inject drugs are exposed to a higher risk of HIV infection, especially if they share needles or, because they are under the influence, engage in unprotected intercourse. One study of Montreal street youth found that over 47% had injected drugs in their lifetime.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) street-involved youth may find it more difficult to access programs and services, including shelters, if they perceive a homophobic and unsafe environment.

Socio-Cultural Issues

- Young people face conflicting messages about sexuality. While adolescent sexuality is used, and even exploited, in advertisements, music videos, television shows and movies, young people are often

encouraged to “just say no” – an attitude which can inform and shape sexuality education in schools as well as programs and services in communities. Without consistent access to quality information and services, STI/HIV and unintended pregnancy prevention can be challenging.

- Gender stereotypes are also barriers to sexual and reproductive health. Traits considered typically masculine include sexual prowess, physical strength, irresponsibility, and unwillingness to commit to long-term relationships. Traits considered typically feminine include sexual disinterest, passivity, and selflessness. Stereotypes can serve as barriers to obtaining information and services as well as developing good communication and behavioral skills.
- There are several factors that increase HIV risk for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) and questioning youth, including: isolation, lack of services, homophobia, lack of role models, alienation from organized religions, and hostile environment at schools. In working through the sometimes difficult and isolating process of “coming out”, STI/HIV prevention may not be a priority.
- Adolescence and young adulthood are often a time of alcohol and drug use or experimentation that can include injection drug use. Youth who inject drugs are exposed to a higher risk of HIV infection, especially if they share needles or, because they are under the influence, engage in unprotected intercourse.
- Some young men use steroids to increase their performance in sport or to change their appearance. Steroids can be taken orally or by injection. Among young Canadians who inject, as many as 7,500 may be sharing needles or vials of steroids. Anyone who shares needles or vials is at risk of contracting diseases such as hepatitis B and C and HIV.
- Female genital cutting can increase a woman’s risk for HIV. Any open wounds provide an easy entry point for the virus.

Aboriginal Youth

- Aboriginal youth begin to have sexual intercourse at a relatively young age, as young as eleven years old. In one study, 62% were sexually active by the age of sixteen.
- Alcohol and drug use are major factors in the sexual practices of Aboriginal youth. Youth who inject drugs are exposed to a higher risk

of HIV infection, especially if they share needles or, because they are under the influence, engage in unprotected intercourse.

- In one study of Aboriginal youth, 61% of females and 35% of males reported some sort of sexual abuse. Sexual violence can lead to unintended pregnancy and STIs/HIV.

Violence

- One in four girls and one in seven boys experience sexual abuse. Sexual violence can lead to unintended pregnancy and STIs/HIV.
- Condom negotiation may be difficult or impossible particularly where a fear of violence, alcohol or drug use, and/or exchange of money is involved.

Know the facts

There are many factors that increase a young person's risk of HIV and other STIs. But knowledge is power:

- Learn about HIV and how to prevent it.
- If you have HIV, there are things you can do to stay healthy and keep living an active life.