

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Women are one of the fastest growing populations becoming infected with HIV
- Women in Canada now comprise over one quarter of new diagnoses compared to 10% in 1995¹.
- Women in general are 2-4 times more vulnerable to HIV and have different health care and support needs than men.
- Women comprise about half of all people living with HIV worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, where the epidemic is worst, they make up 57% of people living with HIV, and three quarters of young people infected on the continent are young women aged 15-24¹.
- Aboriginal women now account for approximately 50% of all HIV-positive test reports among Aboriginal people, compared with only 16% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (2003). Aboriginal women comprise nearly 25% of reported HIV cases among Aboriginal people, while non-Aboriginal women account for only 8.2% among non-Aboriginal cases (2003)³.

WOMEN AND HETEROSEXUAL EXPOSURE

Globally, more women contract HIV from their boyfriends and husbands than from casual and/or commercial sex⁴. As of 2005 High-risk heterosexual contact was the source of 80% of the newly diagnosed infections⁵.

HIV or AIDS cases are often reported as stemming from "no known risk factors". In many cases, the risk factor subsequently determined was unprotected heterosexual sex. Lack of HIV knowledge, lower perception of risk, drug or alcohol use, and interpretations of safer sex also contribute to the rate of infection. This suggests that women may be unaware of the risk posed by their partners and/or that healthcare professionals are not recognizing this risk⁶.

RISK FOR TRANSMISSION

In unprotected heterosexual intercourse, a woman is about two times as likely as a man to contract HIV¹. Biologically, the vaginal wall is a much larger surface area than the urethra creating more entry points for the virus. Sperm also contains higher concentrations of HIV than vaginal fluid and it tends to stay in the vagina for some time after sex. In addition, young women are more vulnerable because their reproductive tracts are not fully mature increasing the risk for vaginal tearing⁴.

Girls and women are made particularly vulnerable to HIV by conditions of gender inequality. Economic and social dependence on men often limits women's power to refuse sex or to negotiate the use of condoms. And inadequate access to education and employment opportunities encourage many women to sell or barter sex to survive.

Within families, women and girls are often hardest hit by HIV and AIDS, since the burden of care falls on them, and they are most likely to have to drop out of work or school as a result. Moreover, women's lack of inheritance rights in some societies leads to lost homes and land when a husband or father dies¹.

WOMEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN

It is a common misconception that women who have sex with women are not at risk for HIV. The virus can be transmitted through the sharing of sex toys, oral sex, as well as digital stimulation. Sharing sex toys can be a high risk activity so the recommendation is to use condoms over the toys. Oral sex is a low risk activity but to lower the risk, dental dams are recommended. Digital stimulation is considered a negligible risk (theoretically there is a risk of HIV transmission, but there have been no reported cases), to lower the risk associated with this activity, gloves can be used.

Professionals working specifically in HIV related fields must remember that sexual identity does not necessarily predict sexual behavior. Identification as lesbian (or gay or heterosexual) does not necessarily determine the gender/sex of a person's sexual partners. Risk factors of all types must be taken into account⁵.

REFERENCES

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