


NATIONAL INDIAN & INUIT  
COMMUNITY HEALTH REPRESENTATIVES ORGANIZATION (NIICHO)

# **Aboriginal People Living with HIV/AIDS: Testing and Treatment**



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# **HIV in Aboriginal Communities**



**H**IV infection is a growing problem in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. In many Aboriginal communities the rate of HIV infection is increasing faster than elsewhere in Canada, especially among women and youth. This brochure, produced by the National Inuit and Indian Community Health Representatives Organization (NIICHRO), explains HIV and asks all people to take action on the problem of HIV and AIDS among First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

## **WHAT IS HIV?**

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is a germ that attacks the immune system, the part of your body that helps protect you from infections and cancer. As HIV weakens the immune system you may become sick and develop AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). People who

have HIV are HIV positive and Aboriginal people living with HIV or AIDS are often called APHAS.

## HOW CAN I GET IT?

HIV lives in blood, semen (cum and pre-cum), vaginal fluid and breast milk. The most common ways of getting HIV are from sex without a condom or sharing the needles used for injecting drugs or tattooing. HIV can also be passed from a mother to a baby during birth or breast-feeding. All these ways of spreading HIV can be avoided. HIV infection is totally preventable!

Graphic: Star Horn

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE HIV?

Detecting HIV is done by way of a test which checks for the virus in your blood. This test can be done in a nurse's or doctor's office or in a special clinic where you don't have to give your name (an anonymous testing clinic). Even if you have to use your name to get tested, it is against the law to tell anyone about your results without your permission.

## IF I HAVE HIV, WILL I GET SICK?

As HIV weakens the immune system you can get sick. You may lose weight, become very tired and get infections that you used to be able to fight off in various parts of your body. It may take many years for you to get sick. A nurse or doctor can do blood tests that count how much virus is in your body (a viral load) and count the number of immune cells (CD4 cells) you have. The higher the viral load, and the lower the number of CD4 cells you have, the more likely it is that you will get sick.





## **IF I HAVE HIV, CAN I TREAT IT?**

Yes. There is no cure but HIV can be controlled with medication. The doctor will not prescribe HIV medications until your immune system starts to show weakness and some people go for many years without having to take meds. You usually

need to take more than one medication to treat HIV. These drugs lower the amount of HIV in your body but can never get rid of it completely. The meds will keep you from getting sick and make you feel better.



## **WILL THE MEDICATIONS CAUSE ME PROBLEMS?**

Because the drugs used to treat HIV are very strong they may cause side effects which can make you feel sick. Not everyone gets side effects. Some of the more common side effects are diarrhea, tiredness and headaches. Sometimes other medications will be prescribed to help with the side effects and some doctors can prescribe medicinal marijuana to do this. The doctor and nurse will work with you to find the right combination of drugs that cause the fewest problems.

## **WILL I HAVE TO TAKE MEDICATIONS REGULARLY?**

Once you start medications it is important to take them regularly so the HIV is kept low. If you miss a lot of medication the HIV will become stronger and

the medications will stop working. This is called resistance. The doctor and nurse will work with you to find the right medication to make it easier for you to take it regularly.

Graphic: Angel Deer

## **IF I NEED MEDICATIONS, HOW DO I PAY FOR THEM?**

First Nations and Inuit people can get medications (and other health care services) through a program run by the Government of Canada called Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB). You are entitled to these benefits if you have a Status card or an "N" number. They will pay for most medications prescribed by your doctor. They may also pay for some traditional aboriginal services, as well as for travel to see a specialist. For people without a Status card or "N" number, the provincial and territorial governments have other programs to pay for HIV medications and health care.

## **WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO KEEP FROM GETTING SICK?**

Staying healthy requires more than just taking pills. To fight HIV you should keep your body strong by eating well and staying active. Non-traditional use of tobacco and substance abuse can stress your body and make it harder for



you to fight HIV. Substance abuse can also make it hard to remember to take medications on a regular basis. In addition to medications to treat HIV, many APHAs find it helpful to talk with Elders and to use traditional food and medicine. Reconnecting to aboriginal culture and practice also helps people feel better about themselves and their communities.



## **HOW DO I MANAGE MY EMOTIONS?**

Living with HIV can sometimes make you angry or depressed. It can also make you want to withdraw from friends and family. It is important to try to stay connected with others. It can often help to talk to people, including other APHAs, about how you are feeling. Some communities have AIDS organizations with counselors and support groups that can help.

## **SHOULD I TELL OTHERS MY HIV STATUS?**

In some communities there is still great prejudice around HIV/AIDS. Because of this, telling others about your HIV status may be difficult, or even unsafe. For some, being open about your HIV can be a very brave

thing and can make it easier for you to get support. Sharing this pamphlet can help educate your family, friends and community about HIV. Only you can decide if it is right to tell others about your HIV.

## HOW DO I KEEP FROM SPREADING HIV?

The best ways to avoid spreading HIV are to use a condom when having sex and never share needles. Pregnant women can pass on HIV to their babies during delivery and breastfeeding. Medications can be given to make sure the virus is not spread to your baby. Although it is very uncommon to spread HIV to people you simply live with, you should take care with anything that might have touched your blood, like toothbrushes and razors.

Graphic: Star Horn

*Pregnant women can pass on HIV to their babies*

## WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE HIV, OR DON'T KNOW FOR SURE?

Many people have HIV and don't know it. It is good to get tested for HIV on a regular basis. If you don't have HIV, you can keep from getting it by using a condom when having sex, and never sharing needles, razors or toothbrushes. Talking about HIV with your children, friends, family and community is also very important because keeping silent about HIV will only make it worse. Sometimes people living with HIV are made fun of and treated poorly. People who are living with HIV deserve your care, respect and support.





## HOW CAN MY COMMUNITY AND I FIGHT HIV?

There are many reasons why some Aboriginal communities have such high rates of HIV. Poverty, the legacy of residential schools, loss of culture, injection drug use, prisons and lack of awareness are just a few. To fight HIV in our communities everyone must get involved.

One model for how people can respond to HIV/AIDS in their communities is in *Making It Our Way: A Community Mobilization Tool Kit* on the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network website at [www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca). It is the job of all of us to stop the spread of HIV and to support our people who are now living with it!

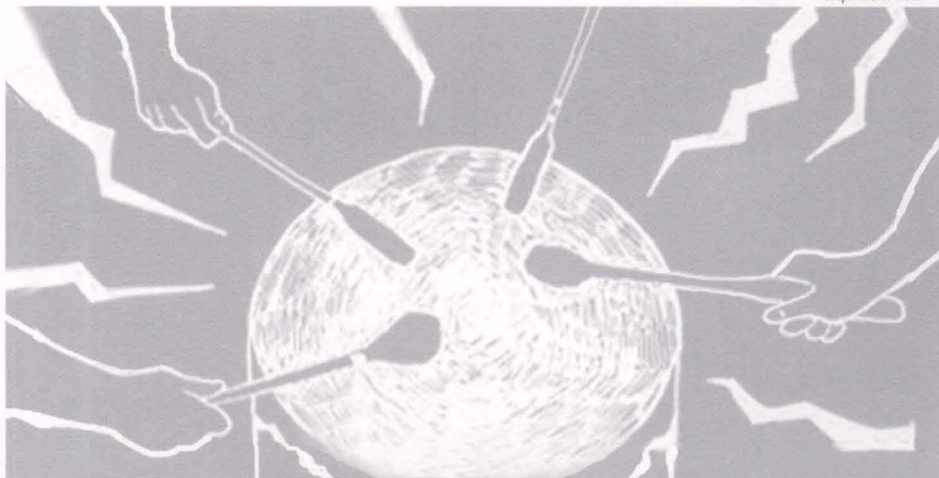


## HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

The best way to fight HIV in our communities is to learn more  
and share the information with others.

Don't be afraid to ask questions because knowledge is power!  
You can get more information by:

Graphic: Star Horn



- Talking to your Community Health Representative or health care provider
- Calling one of the provincial or territorial HIV/AIDS Hotlines listed below
- Checking out some of the AIDS organizations listed below
- Talking to an Aboriginal person living with HIV/AIDS

# ABORIGINAL AND ABORIGINAL-FRIENDLY AIDS ORGANIZATIONS

## NATIONAL

Canadian Aboriginal  
AIDS Network (CAAN)  
1-888-285-2226

[www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca)

Canadian AIDS Treatment  
Information Exchange  
(CATIE)

1-800-263-1638

[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

Canadian Treatment  
Advocacy Council (CTAC)

[www.ctac.ca](http://www.ctac.ca)

Canadian AIDS Society  
1-800-499-1986

[www.cdnaids.ca](http://www.cdnaids.ca)

Canadian Inuit  
HIV/AIDS Network

1-800-667-0749

[www.pauktuutit.ca](http://www.pauktuutit.ca)

## ATLANTIC CANADA:

Healing our Nations

1-800-565-4255

[www.healingournations.ca](http://www.healingournations.ca)

## QUEBEC:

First Nations of Labrador  
and Quebec Health and  
Social Services

1-418- 842-1540

[www.cssspnql.com](http://www.cssspnql.com)

## ONTARIO:

Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy

1-800-743-8851

[www.oahas.org](http://www.oahas.org)

2 Spirited People of the First Nations

1-416-944-9300

[www.2spirits.com](http://www.2spirits.com)

## MANITOBA:

Nine Circles Health

1-204- 940-6000

[www.ninecircles.ca](http://www.ninecircles.ca)

## SASKATCHEWAN:

All Nations Hope

1-877-210-7622

[www.allnationshope.ca](http://www.allnationshope.ca)

## ALBERTA:

Kimamow Atoskanow  
Foundation

1-866-971-7233

## BRITISH COLUMBIA:

Okanagan Aboriginal  
AIDS Society

1-800-616-2437

[www.oaas.ca](http://www.oaas.ca)

Vancouver Native  
Health Society

1-604-254-9949

[www.vnhs.net](http://www.vnhs.net)

## ABORIGINAL AND ABORIGINAL-FRIENDLY AIDS ORGANIZATIONS

### **BRITISH COLUMBIA (con't):**

Healing our Spirit

1-866-745-8884

[www.healingourspirit.org](http://www.healingourspirit.org)

Red Road HIV/AIDS Network

1-866-913-3332

[www.red-road.org](http://www.red-road.org)

Chee Mamuk

1-877-660-1673

[www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=96](http://www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=96)

### **ARCTIC:**

Blood Ties Four Directions Centre

1-877-333-2437

[www.bloodties.ca](http://www.bloodties.ca)

## PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL HIV/AIDS HOTLINES

Yukon: 1-800-661-0408, ext. 8323

Northwest Territories: 1-800-661-0844

Nunavut and Eastern Arctic: 1-800-661-0795

British Columbia: 1-800-661-4337

Alberta: 1-800-772-2437

Saskatchewan: 1-800-667-6876

Manitoba: 1-800-782-2437

Ontario: 1-800-668-2437

Quebec: 1-888-855-7432

New Brunswick: 1-800-561-4009

Nova Scotia: 1-800-566-2437

Prince Edward Island: 1-800-314-2437

Newfoundland and Labrador: 1-800-563-1575

### **For More Information on the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program and Provincial and Territorial Drug Access Programs:**

Fact sheet on the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN)

[www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca)

Fact sheet on the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE)

[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

Health Canada-First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB)

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihb-spni/nihb-ssna/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihb-spni/nihb-ssna/index_e.html)

### **FNIHB PROGRAM OFFICES**

Atlantic Region 1-800-565-3294

Quebec 1-877-483-1575

Ontario 1-800-640-0642

Manitoba 1-800-665-8507

Saskatchewan 1-877-780-5458

Alberta 1-800-232-7301

British Columbia 1-800-317-7878

Yukon 1-867-667-3942

Northwest Territories and Nunavut  
1-888-332-9222

Nunavut [www.tunnngavik.com](http://www.tunnngavik.com)

Nunavik [www.makivik.org](http://www.makivik.org)

Nunatsiavut [www.nunatsiavut.com](http://www.nunatsiavut.com)

Northwest Territories [www.irc.inuvialuit.com](http://www.irc.inuvialuit.com)





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