

HIV and AIDS Among Women in Canada

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Canada was initially concentrated among Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM). Since the mid 1980s, HIV/AIDS has increasingly affected other groups such as injection drug users, heterosexuals, and to an increasing extent, women. The HIV epidemic among women is of additional concern because of the potential for transmission to their infants. This report updates the status of HIV and AIDS among women in Canada.

AIDS reports are increasing among women

- Of the 14 185 AIDS cases reported in Canada up to September 30, 1996, 936 (6.6%) were among women: 866 in adults aged 15 years and over and 70 among children less than 15 years old. The proportion of AIDS cases among adult women has increased steadily from about 5.5% during 1981-89 to 7.2% during 1993-1996.
- Adjusting the numbers of case reports among women for under reporting/reporting delay brings the total number of cases among women to about 1,200 by December 1995.
- 63% of AIDS cases among adult women are due to heterosexual contact with the remaining cases due to injection drug use (17%), receipt of blood/blood products (13%), and no identified risk factor (7%). The proportion of female AIDS cases aged 15-44 years attributed to injection drug use has increased dramatically from 10% in 1981-89, to 20% in 1990-92 and to 28% in 1993-1996.
- As of September 30, 1996, 116 AIDS cases had been attributed to perinatal transmission.

HIV data also suggest increasing infection among women

- While AIDS data provide information on HIV infections occurring about 10 years in the past, HIV data provide a picture of more recent infections.
- Using recent seroprevalence studies, HIV testing surveys and other epidemiologic information, we estimate that by the end of 1994, 42,500-45,000 Canadians had ever been infected with HIV. Of this number, an estimated 4,200 were adult women, 90% of whom were of child-bearing age (15-44 years) at the time of infection.
- HIV prevalence studies among pregnant women indicate an average rate for Canada of about 3-4/10,000. The provincial range is from 1.9/10,000 (Ontario 1991-92) to 8.7/10,000 (Newfoundland 1991-93) and large metropolitan areas have higher rates (4.7 for Vancouver versus 3.4 for the rest of B.C. in 1994 and 15.3 for Montreal versus 5.2 for the province of Quebec in 1990). However, even provinces without large metropolitan areas can have significant rates (for example, 3.9/10,000 in New Brunswick for 1994-96) and recent data from Manitoba suggest an increasing trend of HIV infection among women of child-bearing age (from 0.7/10,000 in 1991 to 3.2/10,000 in 1994-1995).
- HIV prevalence among women attending STD clinics across Canada varies from 0.1- 0.4%. Among women in prison, prevalence rates range from 1.2 - 9.8% and infection is strongly associated with a past history of injection drug use.