

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

AIDS: It's Everywhere, Including Canada's Smallest Province

By CINDY VENEMA

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a preventable, yet a growing disease. Canada, in fact, has one of the highest rates of infection in the developed world. The epidemic has spread rapidly, and it is estimated that 50,000 Canadians are now infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).

HIV is what humans should be scared of, because this virus is what is spread from one person to another. AIDS is the advanced stage of HIV. The virus attacks and seriously damages the body's immune system. Without the protection of the immune system, people with AIDS suffer from fatal infections and cancers.

The highest risks of attracting HIV is through sexual intercourse with an infected person; the sharing an infected needle or syringe; and through an infected mother to her baby. You cannot get AIDS from: sneezing or coughing; kissing; using toilet seats or

water fountains; touching or shaking hands; swimming in a pool; or showering in a locker-room.

What are the symptoms of an HIV positive person? Actually, a person infected with the virus may not show any symptoms for many years. However, over time, most people will develop illnesses which become more and more severe as the immune system weakens. Some general symptoms that people with HIV may develop:

- *persistent fatigue
- *unexplained weight loss
- *diarrhea
- *enlarged lymph glands in the neck, armpits or groin
- *night sweats or fevers
- *thrush, which is a thick persistent whitish coating on the tongue or throat

Take note that some of these symptoms are often caused by common illnesses and not by HIV infection.

In Health and Welfare Canada, 1993, the statistics of people who have devel-

oped AIDS in Canada have become infected by the following activities:

- Men who have sex with other men: #5,633 77.4%
- Sharing needles to inject drugs: # 150 2.1%
- Both of the above: # 257 3.5%
- Recipients of blood or blood products: # 314 4.3%
- Heterosexual sex:

562 7.7%

-Children born to an infected mother: # 60 0.8%

-Occupational exposure: # 1 0.0%

-Insufficient Information: # 305 4.2%

The greatest risk for attracting HIV in Canada is from having sex with an infected person. However,

with the right protection, people can avoid the high risks of getting AIDS. Using a latex condom for all sexual acts, or abstaining from sex are the best methods of protection.

Another high risk for developing AIDS is through the injection of drugs. Therefore, do not share needles; even better, avoid using drugs that require injection.

On Prince Edward Island, there are 27 known cases of HIV. However, a study done in 1991 by Dr. Sweet, Chief Medical Officer on PEI, indicated there could be nine times the official amount of HIV victims on the island. The reason for these "hidden" victims is because there is no anonymous testing available in the province. Therefore, a lot of people are travelling off the island to get tested and are consequently not recorded.

Does the closeness and intimacy of the island society intimidate people to admit to the dangers of the virus in their community? No, according to Cheryl Sanderson, Rural Development Coordinator at AIDS PEI. People are not completely comfortable with the virus; however, that is a common feeling across the nation.

People still have the perception that AIDS occurs in larger cities such as Halifax and Toronto; yet, per capita, PEI is no different. These misconceptions are being solved by sending speakers to rural areas; thereby, increasing people's awareness. In the province, AIDS victims and their families can go to two support groups. There is also individual counselling available.

