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HIV today

Twenty-five years ago an HIV diagnosis was the equivalent of a death sentence. Today, advances in treatment have transformed HIV into a chronic, manageable disease.

Research has demonstrated the benefits of HIV sustained treatment are twofold: it reduces the level of HIV in the blood to undetectable levels thus improving the health of people with HIV, and decreases the level of HIV in sexual fluids to undetectable levels thus reducing the likelihood of HIV transmission by more than 95 per cent.

Treatment has also been shown to eliminate progression of HIV infection to AIDS and premature death, and significantly decrease the amount of virus in the blood and sexual fluids, thereby preventing transmission of HIV.

The earlier an individual is engaged in sustained treatment and care, the more effective it is and the better the health outcomes. A person receiving an early HIV diagnosis and beginning treatment can expect to live longer.

Seek and Treat for Optimal Prevention of HIV/AIDS (STOP HIV/AIDS)

British Columbia is a recognized leader in the global fight against HIV/AIDS.

The development of programs such as Seek and Treat for Optimal Prevention of HIV/AIDS (STOP HIV/AIDS) have expanded HIV testing, identifying more people infected with the disease and enabling them to get proper, life-saving treatment.

STOP HIV/AIDS began in 2009 as a four-year, \$48-million pilot in Vancouver's inner city and Prince George. The pilot strategy involved widespread HIV testing and earlier access to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) to those medically eligible.

During the pilot, more people were offered and accepted an HIV test, more people previously unaware of their infection received a diagnosis, and more of those medically eligible decided to start treatment.

In 2012, the Province of British Columbia announced \$19.9 million in annual funding to expand the initiative throughout B.C. The new provincial strategy was outlined in the document "[From Hope to Health: Towards an AIDS-free Generation.](#)" The provincial rollout was implemented April 1, 2013.

HIV in Canada, British Columbia and Interior Health

Approximately 77,000 Canadians are currently living with HIV, representing an increase of 5,700 people (eight per cent) since 2011. An estimated 18,500 people living with HIV in Canada remain undiagnosed and unaware of their HIV status.

B.C.'s aggressive approach to fighting HIV and AIDS has led to marked decreases in morbidity, mortality, and new HIV cases. At the height of the epidemic in the late 1980's, the number of new HIV diagnoses was over 800 a year. In 2012, the number of new HIV diagnoses had dropped to 238. To date, B.C. is the only province in Canada to consistently demonstrate a decline in new cases of HIV. Among the

province's successes, routine testing of pregnant women has virtually eliminated HIV transmission from mother to child.

It is estimated there are 3,500 people in British Columbia who have HIV and don't know it. Put another way, one in four people with HIV in B.C. don't know they carry the virus.

Approximately 40 per cent of new HIV cases in the Interior Health region do not have an identifiable risk factor meaning they don't fit into one of the "traditional" high prevalence populations. Half of those diagnosed with HIV in the Interior Health region are diagnosed in the late stages of the disease.

Expanded HIV testing under initiatives like STOP HIV/AIDS will help identify people living with HIV earlier and connect them to life-saving treatment, while also preventing further transmission of the virus in the population.

HIV testing guidelines in British Columbia

In May 2014, [new HIV testing guidelines](#) were introduced in British Columbia to make accessing HIV testing easier. It is now recommended that practitioners offer an HIV test:

- Routinely, every five years, for all patients aged 18 to 70 years.
- Routinely, every year, for all patients aged 18 to 70 who belong to populations with a higher burden of HIV infections.
- Once at age 70 or older if the patients' HIV status is not known.

And, offer an HIV test to patients including adults 18 to 70, youth and the elderly, whenever:

- They present with a new or worsening medical condition that warrants laboratory investigation.
- They present with symptoms of HIV infection or advanced HIV disease.
- They or their providers identify a risk for HIV acquisition.
- They request an HIV test.
- They are pregnant.