

# 25

## If I am a straight woman, can I get HIV?



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*Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada.*

Yes! Anyone can be infected because it's not who you are that matters—it's what you do that puts you at risk for infection. For women, heterosexual contact has the highest level of risk for HIV infection. In Canada, more than 7,000 people have been infected with HIV from male/female sex. Globally, more than 70% of HIV infections result from heterosexual sexual contact.

### What puts women at risk?

More and more women are being infected with HIV at the fastest growing rate and the number of women being diagnosed with AIDS grows steadily each year. Male-to-female transmission of HIV is estimated to be eight times more likely than female-to-male transmission. This is due to a few factors:

- because there are more men than women infected with HIV, the chance is higher that women would have an infected sex partner
- HIV is more easily transmitted from men to women due to the larger soft skin surface of the vulva and vagina and the possibility of tiny tears in the vagina during intercourse
- there is more virus (HIV) present in semen than in vaginal secretions which also increases the risk for women.

Injection and non-injection drug use puts women at increased risk for HIV infection and is strongly linked to unsafe sex practices. Sexual abuse and forced sex also places many women at risk for infection, increasing the possibility of tears in the vagina or anus due to the use of force, the lack of lubrication and increased stress.

Poverty also puts women at risk. In Canada, women are more likely than men to be poor. Because of this, women are more likely to engage in risky behaviours and less likely to have access to proper health care services. Many women have to exchange sex for money in order to care for themselves and their children. For these women, the struggle for daily survival may be a higher priority than concerns about HIV infection.

### What makes prevention difficult?

Women do not wear the condom. To protect themselves from HIV infection, women must not only rely on their own skills, attitudes and behaviours regarding

condom use, but also on their ability to convince their partner to use a condom. Gender, cultural beliefs and lack of power may be barriers to practicing safer sex with a male partner. Women generally are not expected to discuss or make decisions about sexuality.

There is also a difference in how our society sees the activities of each gender: while a young man who carries condoms and who is sexually active may be considered to be a “stud,” a young woman carrying condoms and who is sexually active may be considered to be “easy” or desperate. Many women who refuse sex or request condom use risk being abused or suspected of being unfaithful.

Women are more likely to protect themselves from pregnancy using methods that do not depend on partner co-operation, such as the pill, which do not protect them from HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). More female-controlled methods to prevent HIV transmission are needed. The female condom was introduced in the mid-1990s but so far, results have been mixed as to its usefulness, affordability and interest in use. Further efforts are needed to develop and test vaginal microbicides (see Question 21 “What are microbicides?”) as effective prevention methods.

## **How do I reduce the risk of HIV infection?**

- always carry condoms with you, especially if you will be drinking or doing drugs
- talk about safer sex with your partner—before you get into bed (and don’t leave it up to your partner to raise the topic!)
- get tested if you think you have been exposed to HIV
- make sure to use lubrication which can reduce the risk of infection by decreasing tearing during intercourse.

***For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.***

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For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1  
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