

WORLD AIDS DAY

FOR MANY, DECEMBER IS A TIME OF REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION, MARKED BY SEVERAL SIGNIFICANT DATES AND CULTURAL HOLIDAYS THROUGHOUT THE MONTH. This year, Doctors Nova Scotia (DNS) is spotlighting one of these dates by encouraging staff and members to recognize World AIDS Day on Dec. 1. World AIDS Day is part of a global movement to unite in the fight against HIV and AIDS. This memorial date aims to show strength and solidarity against HIV stigma and to remember lives lost to HIV-related illnesses.¹

HIV epidemic in Canada

HIV and AIDS have had devastating impacts on individuals and communities globally, claiming more than 35 million lives in the past 40 years.¹ Today, thanks to advances in research and medical technology, an HIV diagnosis is not an automatic death sentence. With the development of antiretroviral therapies, people with HIV can expect to live a long and healthy life without fear of transmitting the disease.²

Undetectable = untransmittable

Despite these advances in treatment, over 2022–23, Canada saw a 35.2% increase in new HIV diagnoses compared to pre-COVID-19 incidence.³ Additionally, Nova Scotia's progress toward meeting global HIV targets has stalled, with an estimated 13% of people currently living with HIV being undiagnosed – below the 95% diagnosed target.⁴

Research has shown that the HIV epidemic has been exacerbated by lack of access to testing caused by health inequities and a further reduction in testing services during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Additionally, lack of education and the persistence of cultural stigma contribute to creating a culture of fear that discourages individuals from learning their HIV status.

As outlined in the Canadian government's 2024–30 sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections action plan, to address the HIV epidemic, in addition to prioritizing patient-centred, trauma-informed and culturally sensitive care, physicians should prioritize:

- promoting comprehensive sexual health and wellbeing across the lifespan
- facilitating access to testing and care
- addressing stigma and discrimination

Disproportionate burden

HIV does not discriminate: it can affect anyone, no matter their age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. However, research has demonstrated that certain populations carry a disproportionate burden of HIV in Canada. HIV prevalence is concentrated in marginalized communities, notably sexual minorities and racialized communities, because of embedded disparities that create health inequalities.⁴

Doctors Nova Scotia is deeply committed to combating stigma and promoting equitable health-care access for all. Physicians play a vital role in this effort, recognizing the strengths and protective factors that exist within individuals and communities, and working to build on those strengths to support and enhance wellness.

Resources

1. About - World AIDS Day – tinyurl.com/WorldAIDSday-About
2. HIV Basics – tinyurl.com/CATIE-HIVbasics
3. CANFAR's Plan to End HIV in Canada | CANFAR – tinyurl.com/CANFAR-plan
4. The Epidemiology of HIV in Canada – tinyurl.com/CATIE-HIV-epidemiology



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