

## HIV rates on the rise in Canada

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OTTAWA - An estimated 58,000 people in Canada are living with HIV-AIDS and about a quarter of them don't know they are infected, according to new figures released Monday by the Public Health Agency.

The number of people living with HIV in 2005 is up from the last estimate in 2002 when 50,000 were believed to be infected, a 16 per cent increase.

The new data also indicated the number of new HIV infections last year stayed about the same or may have gone up. An estimated 2,300 to 4,500 new infections occurred in 2005, compared with 2,100 to 4,000 in 2002.

The higher number of people living with HIV is partly due to the number of new infections, but is also because improved treatments and drugs mean people are living longer with the disease, according to the agency. For that reason, the higher number of Canadians living with HIV is expected to keep rising, said the agency.

"Mortality and morbidity has gone down significantly," said Dr. Frank Plummer, director general of the Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control at the agency. "These drugs are really lifesavers."

The report also noted that at the end of 2005, an estimated 27 per cent of the 58,000 individuals living with HIV were unaware of their infection. The Public Health Agency said that makes this group "hidden" to the health care and disease monitoring systems.

The new estimates provide a snapshot of which population groups in Canada are contracting the disease and how.

Men who have sex with men and injection drug users are the most at-risk, but the number of heterosexual men and women infected through unprotected sex is rising. Aboriginal Canadians are almost three times more likely to be infected with HIV than other Canadians, and people who have immigrated from countries where HIV is endemic are also over-represented in the HIV-positive population.

Slightly more than half of the Canadians living with HIV are gay men (51 per cent) and at 45 per cent they continue to account for the greatest portion of new infections.

The Public Health Agency estimated that women

now account for 20 per cent of people living with HIV infection, and they made up 27 per cent of all new infections in 2005.

The number of people who contract HIV through injection drug use has been declining since 2002 from 19 to 14 per cent of the total number of new cases. The Public Health Agency said it has worked hard to reduce the high rates among people who inject drugs.

"While this is good news, and provides evidence of the success of these evidence-based initiatives, the number of new infections among people who inject drugs remains unacceptably high at an estimated 350 to 650 during 2005," it said in a news release.

Injecting drugs with contaminated needles is also the primary method of exposure for aboriginal people, said the agency, accounting for about 53 per cent of new infections in that population. Aboriginal men who have sex with men made up just 10 per cent, quite a different distribution than the wider group of new HIV cases.

Canada is not alone in high HIV rates among its indigenous population, and consequently how to stop that trend will be one of the topics of discussion at the upcoming international conference on AIDS, which begins Aug. 13 in Toronto.

Plummer said Canada's HIV incidence and prevalence rates are similar to other Western nations, and while many improvements have been made to help prevent and treat HIV, there is more work to be done.

"The Toronto International AIDS conference provides an excellent opportunity to increase awareness among all Canadians that HIV is 100 per cent preventable," he said.