



# **HIV and AIDS in Canada: A Christian Perspective**

*An Introductory Study for Teens  
and Adults*

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The purpose of this study is to create awareness about HIV and AIDS, dispel myths around the epidemic, think about HIV and AIDS from a biblical perspective, and encourage participants to become involved in helping with this issue.

## Prior to the Gathering

- On chart paper, list the nine questions, without the answers, listed on pages 2 and 3 of this resource.
- Photocopy pages 2 and 3 of this resource, and cut apart the answers.
- Gather a Bible and pencil for each participant.

## As Participants Gather

Encourage everyone to greet others with a handshake or a hug as a sign of openness.

## Introducing the Topic

1. Show the video “Our Response to AIDS,” which can be downloaded at [www.presbyterian.ca/resources/online/1393](http://www.presbyterian.ca/resources/online/1393). This 10-minute video shows how AIDS affects people’s lives in Malawi.
2. Invite participants to list things that they know or have heard about HIV and AIDS. Reassure them that it is okay to list things that may not be entirely accurate. There are many myths and misconceptions and much misinformation floating around about HIV and AIDS.
3. Look at the list of the nine questions listed on chart paper. Invite participants to explore accurate information about each question by having various group members, one at a time, read the answer to a question which you have previously cut apart. Pause briefly after each answer is read and ask, “Is there new information for you in this? In what way does this help you understand HIV/AIDS?”

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# Nine Questions About HIV and AIDS

## *What is HIV?*

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that causes AIDS. Viruses infect the cells that make up the human body, and then reproduce (make new copies of themselves) within those cells. A virus can also damage human cells, which is one of the things that make a person ill.

## *What is AIDS?*

AIDS is the acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a medical condition where the body's natural defense against diseases is damaged.

## *When does HIV cause AIDS?*

An immune system weakened by HIV makes the body more vulnerable to other infections. It won't always have the strength to fight off things that it could have before. As time goes by, a person who has been infected with HIV is likely to become ill more and more often until, usually several years after infection, he or she becomes ill with one of a number of particularly severe illnesses. It is at this point in the stages of HIV infection that a person is said to have AIDS.

## *How long does HIV take to become AIDS?*

Without drug treatment, HIV infection usually progresses to AIDS in an average of ten years. This average, though, is based on a person having a reasonable diet. Someone who is malnourished may progress to AIDS and death more rapidly. Antiretroviral medication can prolong the time between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS. Modern combination therapy is highly effective. Theoretically, someone with HIV who receives good medical intervention can live for a long time before it becomes AIDS.

## *Is there a cure for AIDS?*

There is no cure for AIDS. Worryingly, surveys show that many people think that there is a "cure" for AIDS, which makes them feel safer, perhaps leading them to take risks that they otherwise wouldn't. There is antiretroviral medication that slows the progression from HIV to AIDS, which can keep some people healthy for many years. In some cases, the antiretroviral medication seems to stop working after a number of years, but in other cases people can recover from AIDS and live with HIV for a very long time. But they have to take powerful medication every day of their lives, sometimes with very unpleasant side effects. There is still no way to cure AIDS. At the moment, the only way to remain safe is to not become infected.

## *How is HIV spread?*

HIV can be transmitted through four body fluids:

- blood
- semen
- vaginal fluid
- breast milk.

The virus can only be transmitted when it enters the bloodstream of the person with whom contact is made. This could be through

- unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal or oral)
- shared needles or equipment for injecting drugs
- receiving a tainted blood transfusion
- unsterilized needles for tattooing, skin piercing or acupuncture
- pregnancy, delivery and breast feeding (from an HIV-infected mother to her infant)
- occupational exposure in healthcare settings.

## *What are the common myths about the spread of HIV?*

Some common myths (falsehoods) are that HIV is spread by

- casual, everyday contact
- shaking hands, hugging, kissing
- coughs, sneezes
- giving blood
- swimming pools, toilet seats
- sharing eating utensils, water fountains
- mosquitoes, other insects, or animals.

## *Is kissing risky?*

Kissing someone on the cheek, also known as social kissing, does not pose any risk of HIV transmission. Deep or open-mouthed kissing is considered a very low risk activity for transmission of HIV. HIV is present in saliva, but only in very minute quantities, insufficient to lead to HIV infection.

Of all the millions of cases recorded, there has only been one documented instance of HIV infection through kissing. This was as a result of infected blood getting into the mouth of the other person during open-mouthed kissing, and, in this instance, both partners had seriously bleeding gums.

## *When was the first AIDS case reported in Canada?*

Canada recorded its first AIDS case in 1982. At the end of 2007, the number of people living with HIV in Canada was 64,800.

# Thinking About HIV/AIDS from a Biblical Perspective

Begin the biblical explorations by asking participants to raise their hand if they have ever touched or would be prepared to touch a

- snake
- large, hairy spider
- dead body
- dirty diaper
- person with AIDS.

Tell participants that you will read two stories from the Bible that speak of Jesus' willingness to touch people whom others thought untouchable.

Read two stories from the Bible: Matthew 8:1–4; Luke 17:12–19.

Copy the following page and divide into pairs or small groups to draw some comparisons between the two biblical stories about lepers and people today with HIV/AIDS.

<b>Leprosy in biblical times</b>	<b>HIV/AIDS today</b>
Leprosy is a range of skin diseases.	What is HIV/AIDS?
Lepers were taken to the outskirts of town and left without resources. They begged for a living.	Where do people with HIV/AIDS live in Canada? In the rest of the world? How do they earn their living?
People were afraid to touch lepers.	Is there evidence that people are afraid to touch others with HIV/AIDS?
In the Luke story, the healed lepers were instructed to show themselves to the priests.	To whom would people with HIV/AIDS “show themselves”?

## Summarize the Bible Study

It is important, when considering suffering, that we not equate it with “God’s will.” Read the following quote:

Presbyterians, with other Christians, do not believe that God wills evil or that God desires suffering in our lives. God is good (Psalm 73:1), and all that God creates is good (Genesis 1:31; 1 Timothy 4:4)... We do not know the reasons for...suffering. What we do believe by faith is that God will be with us in the midst of our sufferings and that God’s grace and power of love will enable us to endure, even in the “darkest valley” (Psalm 23:4).

*Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*, Donald K. McKim, Geneva Press, 2003, pp. 26–27.

## Conclusion: Action and Prayer

Invite participants to share with a partner or the whole group one thing that they plan to do as a result of this study. They may choose to

- participate in a program that creates awareness about HIV and AIDS
- try, in ordinary conversations, to dispel myths about HIV and AIDS
- meet someone with HIV and offer support and encouragement
- visit or take gifts to the sick
- support a local hospital
- organize a fundraising event in their church and direct the proceeds to an HIV and AIDS project supported by the denomination
- pray for those living with HIV and AIDS in Canada and around the world.

Gather in a large circle and invite requests for things participants would like included in a closing prayer. Then join hands and pray.

For additional information about HIV and AIDS and what The Presbyterian Church in Canada is doing to combat this epidemic visit:

<http://www.presbyterian.ca/aworldwithoutaids/resources.html>