



PAUKTUUTIT  
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA  
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## WORKING WITH HIV+ INUIT PATIENTS AN OVERVIEW FOR HEALTH CARE PRACTITIONERS

### WHO ARE INUIT?

There are approximately 50,000 Inuit in Canada. They live in 53 communities in the Arctic and sub-Arctic with populations ranging from a few hundred to approximately 6,000 in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut. Inuit regions include the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in the Western Arctic (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec) and Nunatsiavut (Labrador). There are also growing Inuit populations in a number of urban centers outside Inuit regions, including Yellowknife, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Montreal and St. John's. Between 1996 and 2006, the Inuit population in Canada increased from 40,220 to 50,485, representing a 26 per cent increase. In 2006, more than half of all Inuit in Canada were under the age of 24.

Prior to contact with Europeans, Inuit were entirely self sufficient. They lived in small, autonomous, nomadic groups, dependent upon hunting, fishing and gathering for survival and for all their physical needs. As contact with outsiders increased in the twentieth century, Inuit culture began to alter and adapt to the modern world. In the early 1950s, the pressure to change increased dramatically as Inuit were moved into permanent settlements by the federal government. Permanent settlements provided access to schools, health care and material attractions of the modern world. Some families moved to avoid famine and the hardships of life on the land and to take advantage of the benefits that community life promised. Despite adopting various features of modern life and southern culture, many Inuit continue to live according to traditional values that arise out of their own rich cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

There are approximately 50,480 Inuit living in Canada. Approximately 90 per cent of the 11,627 residents of the Nunavik region of northern Quebec are Inuit. There are 14 northern villages on the coast of Nunavik located on the Hudson and Ungava coasts. Nunavik means "place to live."

In 1972, the NQIA (Northern Quebec Inuit Association) was incorporated. In 1975, the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) was signed. In 1978, the Kativik Corporation, the Inuit organization responsible for implementing the provisions of the JBNQA was created to replace the NQIA and three organizations were formed: the Kativik School Board (KSB), the Kativik Regional Government (KRG) and Kativik Health and Social Service Council (now known as Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSS)).<sup>2</sup> Regional

self-government negotiations have been underway for some time, with a final agreement anticipated to be signed in 2010.

The Inuit population is diverse. Inuit living in Nunavik, or urban areas such as Montréal, may be engaged in a range of occupations including health care, resource exploration and extraction, education and public administration. However, the populations of the Inuit communities in Nunavik are small, with few permanent employment opportunities and limited social and economic infrastructure. Fishing, harvesting and arts and crafts remain important components of the informal economy.

Inuit have been resilient to change. While the legacy of residential schools and forced relocation from the land to settlements continue to have an effect with links to social issues such as substance abuse, there is an increasing movement towards healing. Inuit use a holistic approach (mental, emotional, spiritual and physical) to assist a person's healing.

Inuit communities continue to experience high rates of sexually transmitted infections as reported by the Public Health Agency of Canada. In Canada, the general rate of Chlamydia in 2004 was 197 per 100,000. In the North the rates are 1,353 cases per 100,000. This can be attributed to factors such as lack of awareness of sexually transmitted infections and the risk involved (PHAC 2004). The data is consistent throughout Inuit regions.

In Nunavik, as in other regions of Inuit Nunangat,<sup>3</sup> most communities have services delivered through health centers, with periodic fly-in visits from physicians, dentists and other health care professionals. Most people from Nunavut who require specialist or diagnostic appointments, surgery or rehabilitative services must leave their homes and communities to receive services in larger areas such as Montreal. Community Health Representatives (CHRs) provide a vital role in health care and service delivery in each of the regions. They provide health education, prevention and promotion activities that raise community and individual awareness on a variety of topics such as HIV/AIDS and other transmissible infections.

Natural resource developments in the region have an impact on local residents. With the development of the industry, there are initiatives such as partnerships with regional organizations and the industry to promote healthy choices through information sharing.

## POSSIBLE RESPONSES UPON A POSITIVE DIAGNOSIS

When an Inuk (singular for Inuit) is told of a serious life-threatening illness he/she may respond in disbelief followed by either fear or curiosity of the disease. Like many people, they may feel shame or embarrassment due to the stigma attached to the disease. These feelings may be expressed through anger or denial. There may also be subtle gestures such as turning away from the doctor or fidgeting with their hands. Some may be silent or react verbally. You must also be aware that Inuit respond to questions by either raising their eyebrows to indicate "yes" and by wrinkling their noses to indicate "no".

An Inuk will not always look you in the eye when talking about serious things that may be considered embarrassing. When informing a patient of a positive test result, the aforementioned responses may appear. He or she may not want to talk about it. If they do then there is a chance that they will not look you directly in the eye. Do not take this as being inattentive; rather this is a cultural reaction where some Inuit are more comfortable without direct eye to eye contact when discussing topics of a serious nature.

Your patient may miss appointments for various reasons. They may have insecure housing or employment, addictions issues, unresolved abuse or trauma, or be dealing with other challenging life circumstances. It is important that this information is kept in strict confidence.

This may be difficult in a small community but quite possible. They may also want your assistance with disclosing their health status to family or others.

## INUIT AND HIV

There are 21 confirmed Inuit cases of HIV in Canada.<sup>iv</sup> The exact prevalence of HIV in the Inuit population in Canada is not known. Statistics are not collected by specific Aboriginal group and if data was released by Inuit region the numbers are so low it could lead to identification of individuals. Given the high birth rate and rates of STIs among Inuit, unprotected heterosexual sex remains a significant risk factor. Working with the patient to understand their personal risk factors can help the patient to be careful when there could be an exchange of bodily fluid such as sexual intercourse, sharing of hygienic products or for sharing syringes for intravenous drug use.

Because HIV/AIDS is not widespread in the Inuit communities, it will be important to secure a support system for when the patient chooses to disclose their status. Their support system may include family members, elders, community health representatives, community centers and AIDS service organizations, depending on their location. Some resources in Nunavik and Montreal are listed below.

## RESOURCES

### CARE/TREATMENT CENTERS

Ungava Tulattavik Hospital  
P.O.Box 149  
Kuujuaq, PQ J0M 1C0  
Phone: (819) 964-2905

Inuulitsivik Health Centre  
Puvirmituq, QC J0M 1P0  
Phone: (819) 988-2957  
Fax: (819) 988-2796

The Montreal Chest Institute  
Immunodeficiency Day Center  
3650 rue St-Urbain  
Montreal, QC H2X 2P4  
Phone: (514) 934-1934 ext. 32090

CLSC Montreal  
1801 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West  
Montreal, QC H3H 1J9  
Phone: (514) 934-0354

### MEDICAL TRANSITION/BOARDING HOMES

Nunavik House (Module du Nord)  
6195 rue St-Jacques  
Montréal, QC H4B 1T7  
Phone: (514) 932-9047  
Fax: (514) 932-3359

### SUPPORT/COUNSELING SERVICES

Native Friendship Center of Montreal  
2001 Blvd St-Laurent  
Montréal, QC H2X 2T3  
Phone: (514) 499-1854

Native Women's Shelter of Montreal  
Phone: (514) 933-4688

i Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture*, Ottawa, ON, 2006

ii [www.nunavikgovernment.ca](http://www.nunavikgovernment.ca)

iii The term "Inuit Nunangat" is a Canadian Inuktitut term that includes land, water, and ice, and encompasses the four Inuit regions of the Canadian Arctic and sub-Arctic. Retrieved from [www.itk.ca/publications/maps-inuit-nunangat-inuit-regions-canada](http://www.itk.ca/publications/maps-inuit-nunangat-inuit-regions-canada)

iv Public Health Agency of Canada, *Epi-Update*, 2004

