

Recommendations

PEEL PUBLIC HEALTH'S HEALTHY SEXUALITY PROGRAM

The Healthy Sexuality Program is mandated under the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Mandatory Programs and Health Services Guidelines (MPHSG) and the *Ontario Health Protection and Promotion Act*. Although it is anticipated that the MPHSG will be replaced in Spring 2008 by the Ontario Public Health Standards and associated protocols, no major changes are expected to the requirements for the Healthy Sexuality Program which includes:

- a. **Clinical services** - Services provided include counselling, education and the provision of birth control, counselling specific to unplanned pregnancy, testing and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and anonymous HIV testing. Peel Public Health has six clinic locations throughout Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon.
- b. **Case management** - Public health case management focuses on the control of reportable sexually transmitted infections. Clients receive counselling and education on the particular STI in question, modes of transmission and prevention strategies. All those at risk through contact with the case are identified, notified and encouraged to seek testing and treatment.
- c. **Health promotion** - Among the key health promotion activities for Peel Public Health's Healthy Sexuality Program are broad based communication campaigns focusing on specific populations, collaborating with school boards, and other community based groups and agencies, social service and multicultural agencies, and direct service to those at risk through harm reduction and homelessness initiatives.

The following are recommendations to assist Peel Public Health staff in raising community awareness of HIV and AIDS, in their efforts to reduce the transmission of HIV, and in providing programs and services aimed at enhancing the quality of life of Peel residents who are living with HIV/AIDS.

TO REDUCE THE INCIDENCE OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS AND HIV/AIDS IN THE REGION OF PEEL

Sexually transmitted infections are among the most commonly reported infections to Peel Public Health, especially among youth and young adults. The high rates of these infections suggest that individuals within these age groups are often not engaging in safer sex practices. Furthermore, the presence of an STI increases the risk of HIV transmission. Local and national surveys have demonstrated that there is poor understanding of HIV/AIDS among high school students, despite a high proportion of students who report to be sexually active.

Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Design and implement health promotion initiatives to promote safer sex messages and knowledge about STI including HIV/AIDS by collaborating with local AIDS service organizations and school boards within the Region of Peel.
- Design and implement public awareness campaigns to promote Peel Public Health's Healthy Sexuality clinics as a means to accessing birth control including barrier methods, and STI testing, treatment and prevention counselling.

TO REDUCE THE RATES OF VERTICAL HIV TRANSMISSION IN THE REGION OF PEEL

The risk of HIV vertical transmission from an HIV-infected mother to her child can be effectively reduced through such strategies as the use of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and the avoidance of breastfeeding. In order to enact these strategies, women must first be aware of their HIV status. Peel Region has a high uptake of HIV testing among women receiving prenatal care, at 94% in 2006. Our goal is to have HIV testing offered to all pregnant women who receive prenatal care in Peel.

Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Continue to work with physicians and other health care providers to promote HIV testing as a part of routine prenatal care for all pregnant women in the Region of Peel.
- Ensure that known HIV-positive women receive education and counselling specific to family planning and methods that may reduce the risk of vertical HIV transmission, including the use of ART and the avoidance of breastfeeding.
- Collaborate with physicians and other health care providers in the Region of Peel to provide culturally competent services and culturally sensitive messages about the importance of prenatal HIV testing, particularly for women who are from HIV-endemic countries.

TO INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY AND UPTAKE OF HIV TESTING IN THE REGION OF PEEL

Awareness of one's HIV status is the first step towards ensuring access to the appropriate health care and support services that are available for people living with HIV/AIDS. Knowledge of HIV status is also important as it allows individuals to disclose their HIV status to their sexual and needle-sharing partners and reduce the risk of HIV transmission through safer sex and injection drug use practices. Given that most HIV testing in Peel Region is accessed through community-based physicians, ongoing collaboration with this group of health care providers will be a key element in the efforts to enhance access to HIV testing in Peel Region.

Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Provide ongoing education to physicians and other health care providers on the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in Peel Region.
- Collaborate with local family physicians and other health care providers to minimize barriers to HIV testing, especially for youth, women who are pregnant or are planning a pregnancy, for those who originate from an HIV-endemic country, and for men having sex with men (MSM).
- Investigate and develop mechanisms and sites outside of physicians' offices to provide HIV counselling and testing.

TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS IN THE REGION OF PEEL

Despite medical advances that have occurred in the last decade, and the changing epidemiology of HIV/AIDS, a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS is still one that is associated with considerable stigma for many individuals. This stigma can result in feelings of isolation and shame for many individuals, which may also deter some from seeking out and accessing HIV testing.^{17,18}

Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Continue to provide education and counselling to all HIV-positive clients to increase their understanding of HIV.
- Continue to offer all HIV-positive clients referrals to medical, social and community resources.
- Collaborate with local AIDS service organizations to strengthen the community resources available for HIV-positive clients in Peel Region.
- Advocate for the expansion and financial support of AIDS service organizations within Peel Region.