

The Importance of Sexual and Reproductive Health

February 10-14 marks The Canadian Federation for Sexual Health's 12th annual Sexual and Reproductive Health week campaign. This health promotion event highlights the importance of issues relating to sexual and reproductive health services. It also promotes youth friendly and sex positive messages to communities across the country to support the well-being of Canadians.

This year's theme "*Heart Your Parts*" refers to the whole person: your body, your mind, and your feelings. It is about self-love that is so essential to our sexual health.

What is Sexual and Reproductive Health?

Sexual and reproductive health is a core aspect of our identity and an important part of health and well-being. Our sexuality is part of our personality and we are all sexual beings from birth until death.

The *World Health Organization (WHO)* is the public health arm of the United Nations. They say that being sexually healthy is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. Sexual health also means having a respectful approach to sexuality, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences. This includes the sexual rights of everyone to be respected, protected and fulfilled.

There are many reasons why it is important to be aware of your sexual and reproductive health.

Sexual health is not just a personal subject; it's also a political one. Not everyone in Canada has equal access sexual health education and affordable sexual health services. In Canada, abortion is legal, but many provinces have limited access to these services, and there are also regular attempts by politicians to limit our fundamental reproductive rights. In schools some sexual health topics are covered but not all topics are covered or promote sex-positive messages. Many youth who identify as Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgendered/Queer often face problems such as higher rates of smoking and depression, and are also at increased risk for violence and bullying.

According to the Newfoundland and Labrador Centre for Health Information, the provincial rate of live births to teenaged mothers was 6% in 2006. This increased to 6.7% in 2010. In Western Newfoundland and Labrador, the rate of teen mothers was 9.3% in 2006 and increased to 10.1% in 2010.

Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) continue to be a significant public health concern in Canada. Reported rates for chlamydia, gonorrhea and infectious syphilis have been rising continuously since 1997. There is a higher rate noted in those between the ages of 17 and 24 years. Too many Canadians, especially youth, continue to face unplanned

pregnancies or the risk of sexually transmitted infections because they are unable to access or use of protection in their relationships.

As compared to pregnancies that result in birth, teen pregnancies that result in abortion are more likely to be unplanned. Over 15,000 young women aged 15 to 19 in Canada have an abortion each year and it can be reliably assumed that most of these pregnancies were unplanned. Over the past three years, there have been over 1000 abortions performed in Newfoundland and Labrador and the majority of females having abortion services are between 20 and 24 years of age.

These are reasons why sexual and reproductive health awareness week is an important time to reflect on our values around sexual and reproductive health, and where we must strive to do better.

This week take action to improve or maintain your sexual and reproductive health. Talk about healthy decision making with the people you care about. Reflect on how you can create a sexually healthy new generation who are comfortable talking about and expressing their sexuality.

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