

AIDS

What you must know for protection

AIDS threatens to become a world wide epidemic. Until a cure is found the only way to protect yourself is to be aware of how the disease is spread. As part of AIDS Awareness Week, *Excalibur's* Nancy Phillips explores the physical and emotional realities of the disease.

What is AIDS?

The acronym AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS breaks down the body's immune system, preventing the body's natural defence system from fighting illness.

People with AIDS contract diseases which most people easily combat. These diseases, not the AIDS virus, can prove fatal.

AIDS is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus HIV. This virus was first identified in 1983.

HIV infection does not necessarily mean that a person has AIDS. The virus may live in the body for years with no visible effects. It is not known how many people infected with HIV will remain healthy, but it appears to be more and more likely that everyone who is HIV-positive will develop AIDS. HIV-positive people who are not ill can still pass the virus on to others.

Most people diagnosed with AIDS have died within two years.

How can I catch AIDS?

High concentrations of HIV can be found in the blood, semen, and vaginal fluid of infected people. In order for the virus to be transmitted, sufficient quantities of HIV have to enter the bloodstream.

HIV can be transmitted through:

- Vaginal or anal intercourse, or oral sex with an infected person
- Sharing contaminated needles or syringes
- An infected mother to her baby before or during birth

Only those who have had blood transfusions or blood product therapy (such as Factor 8, a blood clotting agent) before November 1, 1985 are at risk. Since then, all donated blood has been tested for HIV, thus making the risk extremely low.

How can I protect myself against AIDS?

• Practise safe sex. Always use latex condoms during vaginal or anal intercourse, and during oral sex. When used properly, condoms significantly reduce the chance of the AIDS virus being transmitted.

• Choose one uninfected partner and stay monogamous. There is no risk of HIV infection if you have sex only with each other.

• If you use intravenous (IV) drugs, don't share needles. If you do, needles can be sterilized. Pour a cup of common household bleach into a cup. Put the entire needle and syringe into the cup and pull the bleach through. Then empty it into the sink. Repeat. Then pull clean water through the syringe and eject it. Repeat.

What are the symptoms of AIDS?

Someone who is HIV positive may not show any symptoms. That's why it's vital to practise safe sex all the time. Some people with HIV infections develop symptoms which may appear to be related to other conditions.

Symptoms include:

- tiredness
- fever
- night sweats
- unexplained weight loss
- persistent diarrhoea
- a harsh, dry cough
- enlarged lymph glands in the neck, armpits, or groin
- thrush — a thick, white coating on the tongue or throat

Do not assume that you have AIDS if you have some of these symptoms. See a doctor.

People whose immune systems have been compromised develop opportunistic infections. There are infections that almost never occur in people with healthy immune systems.

The most common infections that people with AIDS develop are:

- Pneumocystic carinii pneumonia (PCP): an unusual lung infection that causes persistent shortness of breath and a heavy, persistent cough
- Kaposi's sarcoma: a rare skin cancer that first manifests itself as enlarging, purplish lumps or patches on the skin or inside the mouth
- Brain infection: a direct damage of brain cells resulting in loss of concentration, confusion, and disorientation

Who is at most risk of catching AIDS?

Most AIDS cases in Canada have occurred in homosexual or bisexual men, although heterosexuals are still at risk. Other groups at risk: IV drug users who share needles and syringes; people who received blood transfusions and blood product therapy (eg. Factor 8) before November 1, 1985; infected pregnant mothers who transmit the virus to their unborn children; and persons who have received tattoos, ear-piercing, acupuncture, or any other activity that requires the skin to be punctured, with a contaminated instrument.

What is the AIDS test?

This is a blood test that can be administered by your doctor. The results are kept confidential. The test looks for the presence of HIV antibodies. A person who tests HIV-positive may develop AIDS.

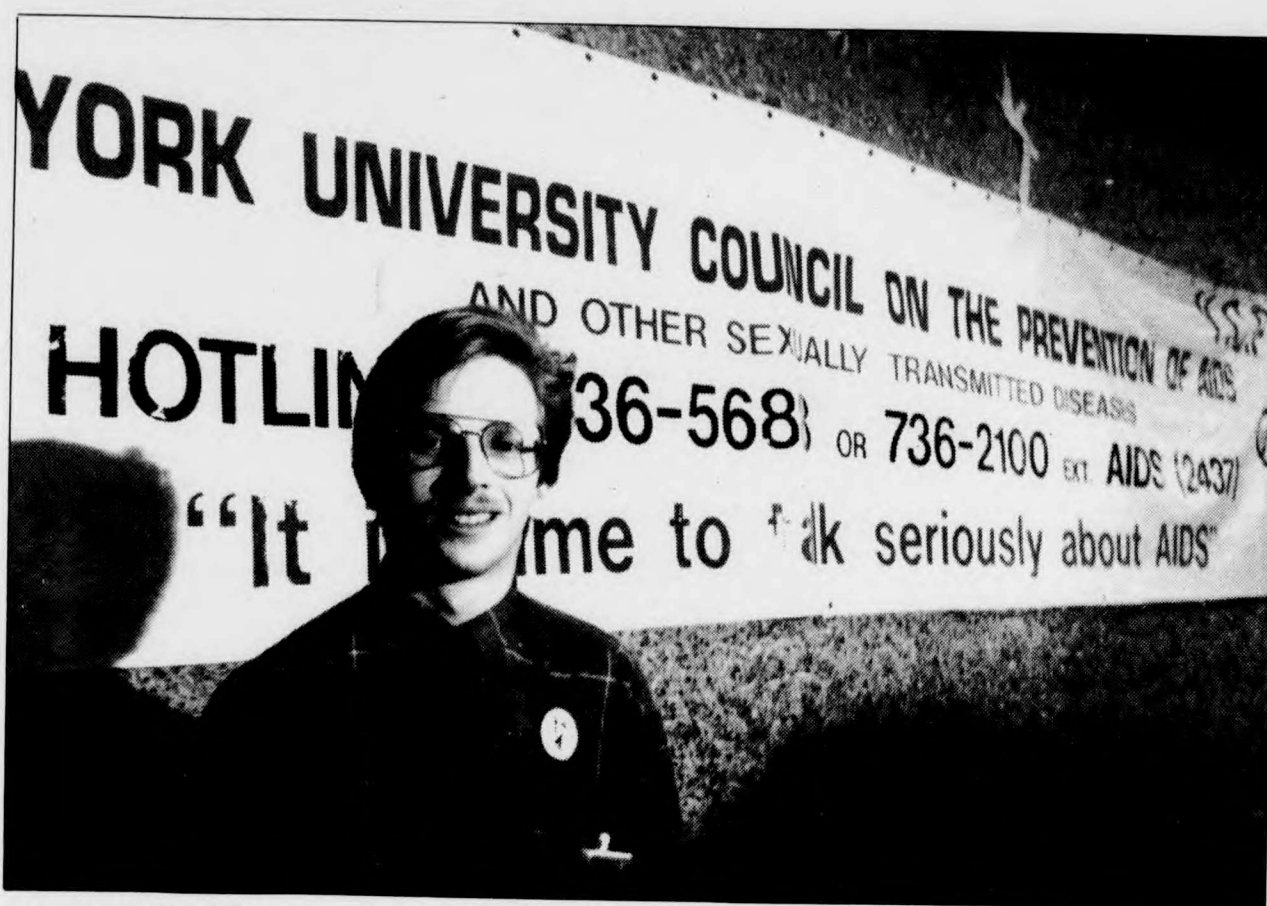
The absence of HIV does not necessarily mean you are not infected. It may take three to six months for HIV antibodies to develop in your blood. A second test should be taken about six months later for confirmation.

Is there a cure for AIDS?

No. The only drugs that are available may help to slow the spread of the disease in the body, but they are not a cure. Scientists predict that one day there will be a cure, but it may not be discovered for many years.

The best way to stop AIDS is to educate and protect ourselves.

Most of the information for this article was provided by the York Council on the Prevention of AIDS, and the AIDS Committee of Toronto.



RON KELLY: "I'm not society's example of a typical person with AIDS."

AIDS activist educates York

Ron Kelly explains that he is "living with AIDS." He found out he was HIV positive in the summer of 1987. He is 22 years old, and gay.

Ron began following the progress of AIDS in 1979, before its cause — human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) — was discovered.

"I never thought I would be someone who would get AIDS, because I'd been following it," says Ron. "I practised safe sex with everyone, except with someone I thought I truly loved."

Ron began what he thought was a monogamous relationship. His lover had an affair, and brought the AIDS virus home.

He says that "people have to realize that if they're going to be in a monogamous relationship, they have to be sure that it really is monogamous."

Ron has revealed that he has AIDS because "I just don't want this to happen to someone else. I want to bring the real world to York." He founded the York University Council on the Prevention of AIDS (YCPA) to provide the university with information about the disease, and individual counselling to help people deal with the virus, whether or not they have it.

"People are still terrified about AIDS," he says, "and there's no reason for students at York to be misinformed. Heterosexual males and females have to be educated." Ron hopes that by coming forward and telling his story he will create an "instant awareness week."

Ron tells of the stages he has gone through in coping with his illness. "At first I really didn't know what hit me. I had no real sense of what was happening for the first few days. I went about my life just as if nothing had happened."

"On the third day I decided that I had to get this out of my system and I got absolutely wasted. I drank a 26-ounce bottle of rye and a flask of vodka. I wasn't feeling a thing from the alcohol. I called a friend and I was as calm as could be. It wasn't until I saw my friend that it hit me that I was HIV positive. Then I was a basket case."

"My friend and I sat in the park until 8 a.m. the next morning. I was with my friend for 10 straight hours. I thought everything would be fine after that — I would go to the AIDS

Committee of Toronto and deal with it.

"I'm not society's example of a typical person with AIDS. It was a total shock to me. I'm not highly active in the gay community in Toronto. I had read about it, and educated myself, and I knew what AIDS was."

After Ron accepted that he was HIV positive he developed AIDS. He had to learn how to live with a life threatening illness.

"I don't want to ride the media wave, I just want to educate people about AIDS"

"AIDS makes you mature like crazy. I don't feel like I'm 22 years old. My joints ache a little sometimes. If I go for a long walk I get tired and have to take a nap . . . I have to budget my energy. I need 10 hours of sleep a night." Ron says he is doing fine now, and that he feels better than he did last year.

"The biggest fear of all," he continues, "is so much uncertainty about what will happen to me next. I don't know when it's going to happen. It's terror. I have occasional nightmares."

"I haven't been able to deal with my age. I haven't even had a chance to start my life. That's where I feel robbed. I'm only 22 years old, and the average age of someone with AIDS in Canada is somewhere around 27 to 30."

Ron is dealing with death by putting his energy into living. "I have to look at it from the point of view of what I am doing for society," he says. "I'm trying to accomplish something. Nobody ever wants to die a nobody. I feel that I should do the most that I can — that's why I've started the YCPA and why I'm coming forward with the fact that I have AIDS. It's to heighten awareness of the issue."

Ron studies music and education at York. He says, "I want to be in school. University is a fun place to be, and since I was seven I've wanted to be a music teacher. I can't let go of that. I'll go to school until I'm physi-

cally unable to. I would love to graduate. If I do it will be very emotional."

Ron wants to educate people about AIDS and give them courage, but he's also admitted that he has the illness because "it's impossible to live with AIDS at university without being able to put on a massive fake job. I couldn't stand having to appear healthy and happy. It's easier when you're just HIV positive, but when the physical signs become apparent, people who see you a lot begin wondering. People thought I was irresponsible for missing classes. It's been tough so far, but all of my professors know what's happening."

Ron wants the university to speed up completion of the York AIDS Policy. He hopes it will state that students with AIDS can go to classes for as long as they are able, and that proper on-campus housing will be available. Regular residence "poses a serious threat to someone who has AIDS, but no threat at all to anyone else," he explains. "The constant contact with 28 to 30 people living on the floor is dangerous. Colds, the flu — people with AIDS are highly susceptible to all of these. Therefore, there is a need for alternative housing in a self-contained environment. That is, an individual apartment."

Ron insists he is not seeking publicity for his own benefit. "I don't want to ride the media wave," he says. "I just want to educate people about AIDS."

The YCPA is the first campus organization in Canada for AIDS education and counselling. Ron is planning the National University and Colleges Conference on AIDS in July to encourage campuses across the country to start groups like the YCPA.

Ron points out that the YCPA is "not here solely for the gay community. All of our counsellors are heterosexual, except for me. I want males and females to call. The YCPA will also provide information on all other sexually transmitted diseases."

Ron says his purpose in life is to finish his education while educating others about AIDS. He believes that "in the long run, I will not lose as much as others will gain."

The YCPA can be reached at 736-2100, ext. AIDS (2437).