

# Understanding Infectious Diseases

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## AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH SIR ELTON JOHN AND HUSBAND DAVID FURNISH ON HIV/AIDS AWARENESS



**Mediaplanet** You have been committed to the fight against AIDS for more than two decades, what encouraged you to become an advocate for awareness and establish the Elton John AIDS Foundation (EJAF)?

**Elton John** I can boil my answer down to two words, a very dear name — Ryan White. Meeting Ryan, his wonderful mother Jeanne, and his sweet sister Andrea in the mid-1980s and helping them during that terrible time when they were cruelly ostracized and terrorized by the very friends, church, and community that should have stood by them when Ryan was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS was truly a turning point in my life. They exemplified courage in the face of overwhelming adversity, responding to hatred and ignorance with love, understanding and education, turning their tragedy into an opportunity to make things better for hundreds of thousands of people living with HIV/AIDS. They also quite literally saved my life. Losing Ryan on April 8, 1990, and watching Jeanne and Andrea deal with their grief with such profound grace and humility motivated me to finally take control of my life, get sober, and find new

purpose in my determination to honour Ryan's extraordinary legacy. In 1992, that new purpose turned out to be the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

**David Furnish** I first met Elton in London in 1993, when the EJAF was still very much in its infancy. Naturally, as our relationship quickly developed, I also became very involved in the Foundation's work. It has been an extraordinary privilege and tremendously rewarding to stand by Elton and help lead and shape this amazing international non-profit organization.

**MP** Why is it important to raise public awareness of this disease — its treatment and prevention — and how can Canadians do their part?

**EJ** HIV/AIDS is a communicable, sexually transmitted, epidemic disease for which we still have no preventive vaccine and no cure. For that reason alone, everyone needs to be educated about the disease — how it is transmitted, and how it can be prevented — and everyone needs to be regularly tested for HIV and know their

status. Also, everyone who tests positive for HIV needs to be immediately linked to appropriate medical care and effective treatment. This reaction is particularly important now because we have definitive proof that HIV-positive people who received effective treatment are 96 percent less likely to transmit the virus to others. We could stop this epidemic in its tracks — without a vaccine or a cure — if we made universal access to HIV prevention and treatment a reality worldwide.

**DF** As a Toronto native, I know how kind and generous Canadians can be. The steps Elton has already stated — getting educated about HIV, getting tested, and if necessary, getting effective treatment — certainly are an excellent start. Beyond these personal responsibilities, caring Canadians should also consider the following efforts: Make generous contributions and volunteer your services to local social justice, social service, LGBT, and/or HIV/AIDS organizations;

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**“EVERYONE** needs to be educated about the disease, how it is transmitted, and how it can be prevented, and **EVERYONE** needs to be regularly tested for HIV and know their status.”

— Elton John



Sir Elton John and David Furnish are international HIV/AIDS advocates making a large impact in Canada. Photo: Greg Gorman

and stand up for the human rights of all people — no matter who they are, who they love, or what they do — and when you see injustice, speak out! Social injustices in the form of racism, homophobia and transphobia, and sexism contribute tremendously to poverty, homelessness, and unjust incarceration. All of these societal ills create barriers to HIV education, testing, treatment, and inevitably cause more infections. If we want to end AIDS, we have to create a more loving, more compassionate, and more just society.

#### **MP What advice do you have for Canadians who are at-risk of contracting or already living with HIV/AIDS?**

**EJ** If you are at risk of HIV infection, get educated about the disease right now. Utilize all of the HIV prevention tools we have now and know to be effective — use condoms conscientiously and properly and/or take PrEP under a doctor's care. If you inject drugs, use clean injection equipment every time, don't share your injection equipment with others, and please reach out to a local needle exchange for help and advice on other injection-related services and support. You may even choose to practice abstinence, if you wish. You have lots of choices for protecting yourself and others from HIV infection.

If you have tested HIV-positive, please, please, get to a doctor right away for proper medical care and effective HIV treatment. The best thing you can do to prevent passing the disease to others is to stay on effective treatment to keep your viral count low to undetectable, which is completely possible with the treatments we have today. Learn about effective HIV prevention methods and use them consistently.

Finally, seek out a local AIDS organization for continuing information and support to help you stay healthy. Once you are feeling well, that's also a great place to start giving back to the community and help other people living with HIV.

**DF** Know that you are loved and that there are people out there who care about you and about your health. If your family has turned away from you, please know that you are not alone. Find a local non-profit — perhaps a homeless shelter, or a social justice organization, or a needle exchange group, or an LGBT center, or an AIDS organization — that can help you take the necessary steps to care for yourself and develop the social supports you need.

#### **MP What are some key organizations, projects and initiatives EJAF is currently funding in Canada?**

**EJ** The Elton John AIDS Foundation has actually funded work in Canada for decades. Since 2012, we've provided more than \$500,000 to over a dozen groups. Just this past year, we've funded three organizations in Canada working on projects related to HIV and refugees, efforts to address unjust use of sexual assault law to target HIV-positive people for having consensual sex, and a project engaging sex workers in the development of a program providing them with medications that prevent HIV infection.

We're very proud of the grants we've awarded in Canada over the years, and we'll certainly continue to provide funding to Canadian organizations doing cutting-edge work, especially for HIV-related issues in the fields of social justice and human rights.

**DF** One of the Canadian grantees we funded in 2014 — the International Human Rights Program at the University of Toronto — is releasing a very important report shortly on human rights abuses in Mexico against people living with HIV, as well as LGBT people and other marginalized populations who are at greater risk for HIV infection. Currently, Mexico is on Canada's safe list regarding immigration, which makes it more difficult for people fleeing human rights abuses in Mexico to apply for asylum in Canada. At EJAF, we believe holding governments accountable and building systems to protect rights and improve lives are central to ending the AIDS crisis, and we're very proud of the important work the International Human Rights Program is doing in this field. **Q**



**7 Canadians** are infected with HIV **every day.**



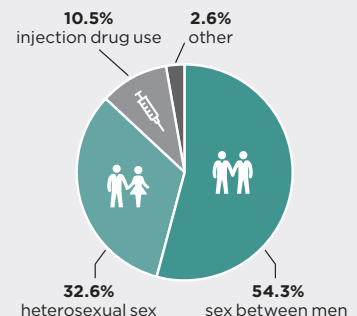
**Almost 1 in 4** new HIV infections in Canada are among females.



**21% of HIV positive Canadians don't know their status.**

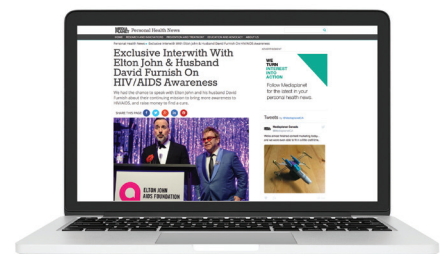
The earlier HIV is diagnosed, the better the chance of living a long and healthy life.

#### **How is HIV currently transmitted in Canada?**



More info on HIV treatment and prevention: [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada



Read the full interview from Sir Elton John and David Furnish on [personalhealthnews.ca](http://personalhealthnews.ca)

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