

# HIV: Newcomers and Treatment Access in Canada



Canadian Treatment Action Council  
Canada's Voice for Treatment Access  
Listening to and led by people with HIV and HCV

"I think I've eliminated that fear of having to live with it because I know it's okay, I know there is help out there for me that can make me well, that I feel like I can live a normal life, I have come a long way.

During my journey I learned the importance of advocating for my own treatment.

This is very important in Canada. You have to help yourself. I hope the information will help newcomers living with HIV in Canada."



# Newcomers to Canada

Arriving in a new country can lead to many challenges. As we become familiar with the new system, we find information and learn new ways of overcoming challenges.

Living with a chronic illness like HIV is complex. Access to treatment isn't always straightforward.

As a newcomer, there are many competing priorities and challenges when settling in a new country, but access to HIV treatment, support, and care is crucial for personal health as well as family wellbeing.

HIV treatment access in Canada is a challenge that we can overcome.

This brochure will provide information to help you understand the Canadian health system better and to make informed choices.





Do you know that an estimated 63,110 Canadians are living with HIV? An estimated 14% of people living with HIV in Canada are unaware that they have HIV.!

# Canada's Health Care System

Canada has a universal, public, health insurance system for medical and hospital care called Medicare. Canada also has 18 different public drug plans, of which 13 are provincial and territorial and five are federal. Each of the plans is different in terms of its scope of coverage.<sup>ii</sup>

Public drug plans vary across Canada, with some covering patients based on age, some based on income, and some based on specific medical needs such as HIV.

The vast majority of people living with HIV rely on public drug programs to access essential medicines.

About 1 in 4 Canadians received a benefit from a public drug program in 2017.<sup>iii</sup>



## Immigration Status

Newcomers to Canada have two major routes to becoming a resident of Canada: by applying as an immigrant or by filing a refugee claim. There are various categories of immigrants and refugees.<sup>iv, v</sup>

Immigration status is commonly referred to simply as "status". It refers to how one is legally in Canada. Status is extremely important for newcomers to Canada, because it determines which services you have access to and impacts your rights in Canada.

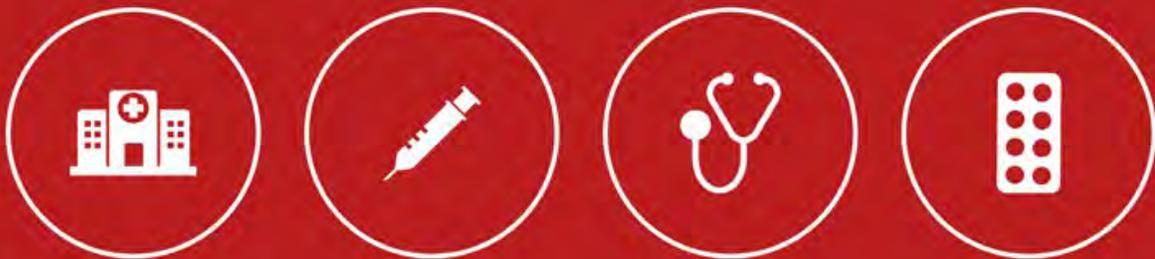
To find free newcomers services near you please visit <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/services/index.asp>.

# Refugees<sup>v1</sup>

The federal government of Canada provides health care to refugees through a program called the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP).

Refugee claimants are eligible for this program once Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) confirms that you are eligible to make a refugee claim.

As of April 1, 2016, you do not have to renew your coverage. IRCC will automatically extend your coverage.



After you have been found to be eligible to make a refugee claim, you will receive a document with your picture on it, called a Refugee Protection Claimant Document.

This document is proof that you are eligible for the Interim Federal Health Program.

Once your refugee claim is successful then you can apply for Permanent Residence, and then apply for health coverage under a provincial or territorial health insurance plan.

Remember when you go to your family doctor you must always take your IFHP document. It is very important.

Your coverage can be cancelled **without notice** if your immigration status changes. If this happens, IRCC's system will be updated. This is why healthcare providers must confirm that you are eligible for the IFHP before a service is rendered.

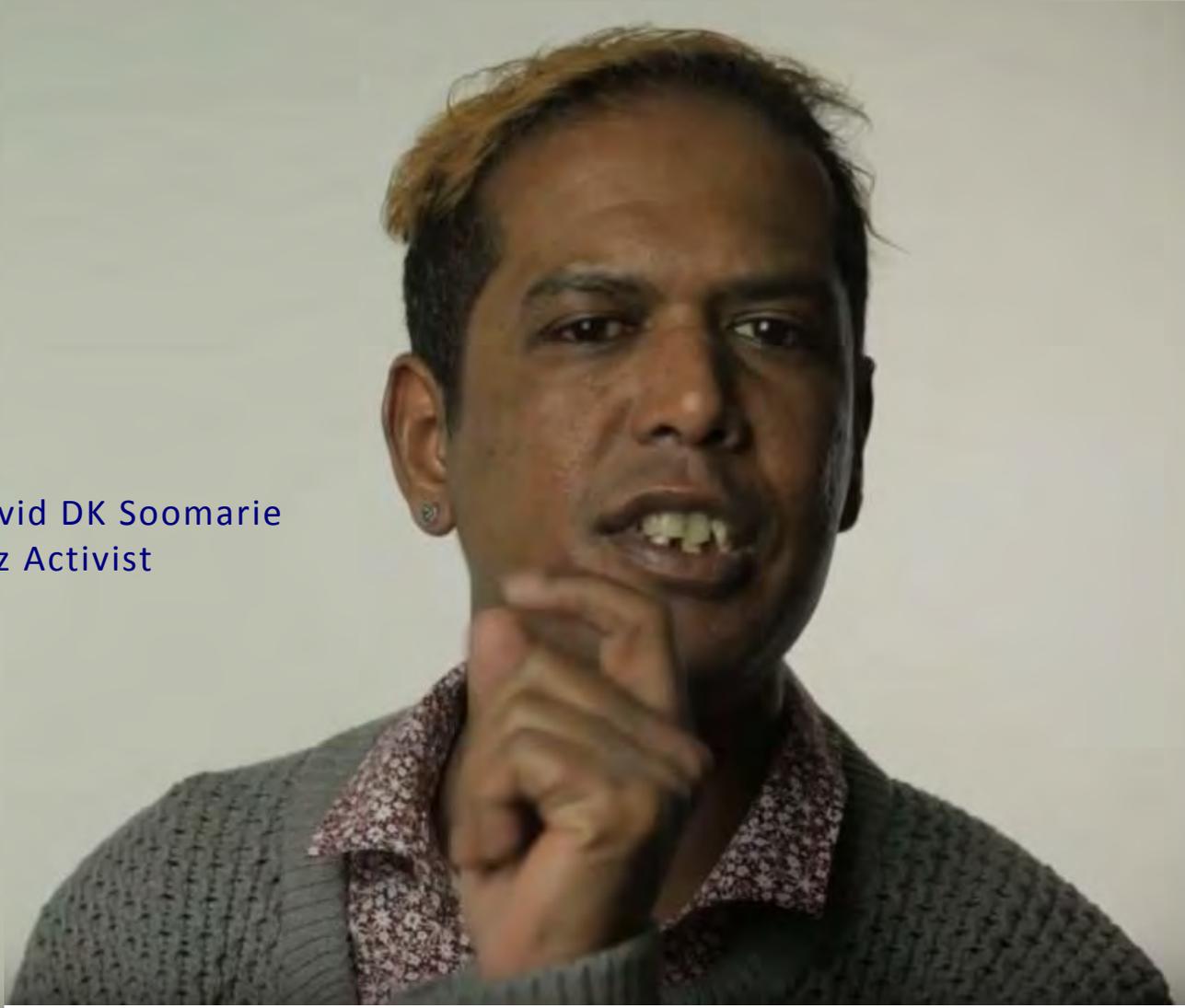
Finding an HIV doctor can be very challenging, especially if you live in a rural area. But remember, your local AIDS service organization (ASO) is a good place to start.

They will help you put together a healthcare team that will be instrumental in assisting you with your HIV treatment.

Please check [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) or phone CATIE toll free at: 1-800-263-1638 to find your nearest ASO.

“You have medication for HIV but no medication for stigma...educating ourselves about HIV is the only way out of stigma.”

David DK Soomarie  
Poz Activist



# Finding a doctor

Finding a primary health caregiver is very important and also difficult. Many Canadians have a family doctor they go to whenever they need medical care. A family doctor gives basic health care and will send you to see a specialist when needed. You can also go to a walk-in medical clinic where you can usually see a doctor without an appointment.

## **You may be able to find a doctor by:**

- Asking someone you know
- Contacting newcomer services in your area, which can be found here:  
<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/services/index.asp>
- Contacting a community health centre (or a Centre local de services communautaires in Quebec) in your area to learn when a doctor is available. To find a local community clinic visit:  
[www.cachc.ca/ourmembers](http://www.cachc.ca/ourmembers)

To find the nearest HIV caregiver as well as language-specific services please [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) or phone CATIE toll free at: 1-800-263-1638. Confidentiality is maintained.



In Canada, health services are provided in a confidential manner.

This means that your doctor cannot discuss your health information with someone else without your permission.

# Temporary residents

If you are in Canada as a temporary resident, you may have access to provincial healthcare. This depends on the kind of temporary resident status you have.

- Visitors to Canada are not eligible for healthcare in any province. A visitor will need to pay for health services and medications out-of-pocket or through private insurance.
- With respect to students, healthcare coverage for individuals in Canada on study permits varies from province to province. You can contact your school's international student office to confirm what kind of health services you are eligible for in the province where you are studying.
- Healthcare coverage for individuals in Canada on work permits also varies from province to province. Again you can discuss with your employer to confirm what health services you are eligible for in the province you are working and residing in.

Your nearest ASO will be able to help you and give you information. To find the nearest HIV caregiver as well as language specific services please check [www.HIV411.ca](http://www.HIV411.ca) or phone CATIE toll free at: 1-800-263-1638. Confidentiality is maintained.



# Medication from your country

All temporary residents in Canada, including visitors, students, and workers are allowed to bring a 90-day supply of medications when they enter Canada. One additional 90-day supply can also be shipped to them during their stay in Canada. These medications must be in their original packaging with an original prescription and an official English or French translation if necessary.

In the case of medications that are shipped to Canada, you should include proof of your temporary resident status (for example, a copy of your visitor visa and passport pages showing your date of entry, or a copy of your work or study permit).

For more information check out: <https://hivcl.org/2014/08/29/its-not-all-easy-traveling-when-it-comes-to-importing-hiv-meds>.

If you are a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, you may apply for government-funded health insurance.

## Finding drug coverage information

All provincial and territorial public drug plan formularies provide coverage for certain HIV medications. Each province and territory in Canada has a different program for subsidizing drug costs for its residents.

The provincial and territorial governments have created drug formularies which list certain drugs and treatments they are willing to subsidize. The availability of certain drugs in each program varies from province to province and among provinces and territories.

These programs have different criteria for who is eligible for coverage; which medications they will pay for; how much the province or territory will pay; how much copayment you may have to pay, if required; and what drugs are listed in which province. Check with your local health care provider or your local AIDS service organization to learn about whether you are eligible for coverage.

For more information see Provincial and Territorial Drug Benefit Programs: [www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-care-system/pharmaceuticals/access-insurance-coverage-prescription-medicines/provincial-territorial-public-drug-benefit-programs.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-care-system/pharmaceuticals/access-insurance-coverage-prescription-medicines/provincial-territorial-public-drug-benefit-programs.html)

# Other available programs

Community Health Centres (CHCs) in Canada offer primary care through a collaborative team approach. You must make an appointment in order to receive services. All CHCs charge low fees and require that you live within the area in which services are provided. An application form has to be completed when you access services. The information and your visit will be kept strictly confidential.

Contact a CHC (or a Centre local de services communautaires in Quebec) in your area to learn when a doctor is available. To find a local community clinic [www.cachc.ca/ourmembers](http://www.cachc.ca/ourmembers).

Health Canada's Special Access Program provides access to medications and your doctor can apply for it on your behalf, but you must discuss this with your doctor since there may be costs involved.

- \* Pharmaceutical companies often run
- \* clinical trials of their drugs that give
- \* eligible participants access to drugs that
- \* are not yet approved or widely available.
- \* Some pharmaceutical companies may
- \* also offer compassionate care programs.
- \* You should discuss your options with
- \* your doctor.

**Please get in touch with your local ASO to find out about other resources that may be available to you to access medications.**

For Canadian citizens or permanent residents, each province and territory has their own health insurance plan which may have a **three-month wait period before coverage begins.**



# Planning to move?

If you are moving from one province or territory to another or from federal to provincial or territorial coverage, you must check the rules for coverage in the new location as these may be quite different. The drugs you take may be not covered or there may be different financial arrangements for coverage. There may be other restrictions you will also need to be aware of.

It may take several months to meet the residency requirements for coverage in the new location, so it is a good idea to make sure you have enough medications to last you at least three months to make sure that you do not run out before you are able to access services in the new area.

**Check to see whether your former location will provide any coverage or additional medications after your move until you are covered in the new area. Your local ASO will be able to help you with information. Also, contact the ASO in your new area as soon as you arrive.**

If it's possible and affordable, consider purchasing private health insurance coverage - this is called 'visitors to Canada' - for the initial three months. Also, remember that not all health related expenses are covered by private insurance.

If you or a family member have a medical emergency, please remember you can always get help at any hospital emergency room regardless of your immigration status. Please note, however, you will be charged a fee for services.



"In 2015 I came here into Canada as a refugee with my family. First I went to the immigrant settlement agency in St. John. My wife and my daughter who is eight years old are HIV positive.

I found it very difficult to get help there so I moved to Ottawa to a shelter. Living in a shelter is very difficult, one room, me, my wife, and two children and you cannot speak about your HIV status in there because there's no privacy.

So what I did, I sought help from the local AIDS service organization. I was so scared. I didn't want to go to an AIDS service organization.

I didn't want to meet up with other community members. What if other community people saw me and my family there. So the support worker met with us in privacy like two people just meeting for a coffee and we talked and I was able to express my concern for me and my family."



# Know your rights

In Canada, you have the right to:

- Receive safe and proper care
- Give or refuse consent for any procedure, and for any reason
- Have a medical professional clearly explain health problems and treatments to you
- Participate in health care decisions
- Ask questions and express concerns
- Request to access your health information records
- Request the transfer of your health records to another medical professional; you may be charged a fee
- Request a second opinion; within reason.

## References

<sup>i</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. Summary: Estimates of HIV Incidence, Prevalence and Canada's Progress on Meeting the 90-90-90 HIV targets, 2016. Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/summary-estimates-hiv-incidence-prevalence-canadas-progress-90-90-90.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canada-health-care-system.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Canadian Institute for Health Information. Prescribed Drug Spending in Canada, 2018: A Focus on Public Drug Programs. Ottawa, ON: CIHI; 2018

Available from <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/pdex-report-2018-en-web.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Statistics Canada 2019: Classification of admission category of immigrant. Available from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca>

<sup>v</sup> Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada available from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship.html>

<sup>vi</sup> How to get health services and products - Interim Federal Health Program. Available from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-within-canada/health-care/interim-federal-health-program/services.html>

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CTAC is Canada's non-governmental organization led by and for people living with HIV and HIV/HCV co-infection, focusing on access to treatment. Since 1996, we have been working to secure and ensure equitable, affordable and timely access to testing, treatment, care and support for people in Canada living with HIV and HIV/HCV co-infection and other co-morbidities. We work with community, public, private and not-for-profit leaders to inform research and public policy, and promote public awareness and discussion.

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