



Canada

Voir au-delà du handicap  
Promoting a new perspective on disability

## Health and Wellness: Persons with Disabilities and Healthy Sexuality

2009

December 03 is the United Nations' annual **International Day of Persons with Disabilities**, which aims to widen awareness of disability issues. Globally, persons with disabilities face stigma and discrimination as well as denial of basic human rights including food, housing, health care, education and employment.

Independent Living Canada is marking the day by focussing on Health and Wellness. Health and wellness are not the same as the presence or absence of a disability; they are broader concepts that have a direct impact on everyone's quality of life. Persons with disabilities can be both healthy and well.

### Did you know?

- Sexuality does not only mean sexual activities – it is about the whole person (your sexual orientation, your reproductive health, your self-image, your feelings, your attitudes, your culture, etc.)
- **Persons with disabilities are just as likely to be sexually active as persons who do not have disabilities,**<sup>1</sup> yet society still believes the stereotypes that people with disabilities are not sexual – that they do not have sexual feelings, are not sexually active, and do not want or should not have children.
- People with disabilities are often denied access to sexual health information or care because of stereotypes about their (absence of) sexuality
- Children and teens with disabilities often do not have access to sex education, and when they do it may not address all of their needs or concerns
- Women with disabilities are less likely than nondisabled women to have regular tests for cervical and breast cancers<sup>2</sup>
- Persons with disabilities – especially women, people living in institutions, and people with intellectual impairments – can be more vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse, in particular from partners and caregivers<sup>3</sup>
- Persons with disabilities face additional barriers in the difficult situation of escaping an abusive partner or caregiver, including inaccessible shelters, communication barriers, financial or physical interdependence, etc.
- Persons with disabilities face as much or even higher risk of being infected with HIV as persons without disabilities<sup>4</sup>

## Some Solutions

- Having a healthy sexuality means knowing the risks involved in sexual behaviours and taking steps to lower those risks; respecting yourself and your partner; saying “no” to any sexual contact you don’t want and saying “yes” to contact you do want; and not to be ashamed of who you are, what you like, or how your body behaves
- **It is your right to be treated with respect.** You can refuse to be in a relationship or to have sexual contact with someone who does not show you the respect and dignity you deserve
- **It is your responsibility to treat others with respect.** If someone does not want to have a relationship with you or refuses sexual contact it is important to respect their wishes
- Access to health is a human right! The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities says it is necessary that persons with disabilities have access to the same kinds of health care and programmes that nondisabled people have, *including in the areas of sexual and reproductive health*<sup>5</sup>
- Learn about safer sexual activities by talking to your doctor or by going to a sexual health clinic and asking questions; if you are nervous, prepare a list of questions and take it with you so you remember to get all of the information you want<sup>6</sup>
- Insist on having routine tests recommended for persons of your age and gender (annual PAP tests, annual prostate exams, etc.) AND regular tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) if you are sexually active
- Speak up! If someone has behaved towards you in a way you do not like or want, tell someone you trust about what happened
- Your local Independent Living Centre can help you find information or services you need to take care of your sexual health; visit [www.ilc-vac.ca](http://www.ilc-vac.ca) for a list of IL Centres

1. “Sexual and Reproductive Health of Persons with Disabilities.” United Nations Population Fund.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services “Sexuality and Reproductive Health.” <http://www.womenshealth.gov/illness-disability/your-health/sexuality-reproductive.cfm> Retrieved 09 November 2009.
3. UNAIDS, WHO and OHCHR Policy Brief: Disability and HIV. April 2009, pp. 2-3.
4. Ibid.
5. United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Article 25(a).
6. AIDS & Disability Action Program. “Know About...Communicating with your Doctor.” BC Coalition of People with Disabilities: 2006, p. 6.