

HIV and AIDS in women in Aotearoa New Zealand: 25 years of surveillance data

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Background:

New Zealand (NZ) aims to eliminate HIV transmission. The overall annual case number has been declining since 2016 but to reach the goal it is important to tailor HIV testing, treatment and support services. To date, there is a lack of published data on women diagnosed with HIV in NZ to guide the response. We therefore describe the characteristics of women diagnosed over the last 25 years.

Methods:

Data on women newly diagnosed with HIV and AIDS in NZ between 1996 and 2020 was collected through anonymous routine surveillance case reports from healthcare providers.

Results:

A total of 637 women were diagnosed with HIV in NZ (18% of all diagnoses in this time): mostly acquired through heterosexual contact (81%).

Twenty-nine percent (n=182/637) acquired HIV in NZ (European 41%, Māori 20%, Pacific 12%, African 14%, Asian 13%), with no clear trend in case numbers over time. Only 29% of these reported a previous negative HIV test and 43% had a CD4 count <350 cells/mm³ at the time of diagnosis. Sexual contact was reported with a bisexual man, a person from a high HIV prevalence country, or a person who injects drugs for 46%, however for 54% the risk status of their partner was not known or reported.

AIDS was diagnosed in 128 women (European 21%, Māori 10%, Pacific 6%, African 34%, Asian 27%, Other 2%) of whom 72% were diagnosed with AIDS within three months of their HIV diagnosis. Thirty-three women have died from an AIDS-defining illness.

Conclusion:

A small, but not insignificant number of women have been diagnosed with HIV in NZ, most of whom acquired the infection overseas. Almost half of women who acquired HIV in NZ were diagnosed late. More timely testing and diagnosis is essential to ensure women can access appropriate treatment and support.

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