

Inclusive & Destigmatizing Language

YouthCO's mission is to reduce the impact of HIV and Hep C stigma on youth in British Columbia. One of the tools we have to support this work is our inclusive language list. Inclusive language is one of the ways we approach providing relatable and relevant information to our peers. Using inclusive language is a way we put our values – including sex-positivity, anti-oppression, and inclusiveness – into action. Being excluded from the information that is provided to us impacts our health, our ability to make informed choices, and the ways we access information and support.

These guidelines are far from exhaustive: there are many, many words used to talk about HIV, Hep C, the communities most impacted by these viruses, sexual health, and harm reduction that reflect stigma, fear, and misinformation. We welcome feedback, suggestions, and additions anytime! YouthCO is also able to facilitate workshops to provide more information as to the ways this language can be stigmatizing, and relevant alternatives for specific settings!

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network has taught us a lot about how we can reframe stigmatizing language into supportive language.

We recognize that some people choose to use words on our “avoid” list to describe our own identities or experiences. YouthCO affirms and supports our choices to reclaim words or use words to describe ourselves.

Avoid saying... Much of this language is stigmatizing!	Instead try neutral or supportive alternatives!
Infect or spread <i>ex. Youth can be infected through sex</i>	Pass <i>ex. HIV can be passed through unprotected vaginal, anal, or frontal sex</i>
Infected with HIV, Hep C, an STI Suffers from HIV, Hep C, an STI, “AIDS” or “HIV/AIDS” when referring to HIV <i>ex. It is important to get tested for AIDS</i> <i>ex. Died from HIV/AIDS</i>	Living with HIV, Hep C, an STI, [other diagnosis] Was diagnosed with an STI [or other condition] HIV <i>ex. It is important to get tested for HIV</i> <i>ex. Died from AIDS-related complications; died from opportunistic infections</i>
“They,” “them” or “those people” <i>ex. When their immune system is weak</i> <i>ex. If they are taking Hep C medications</i>	“We,” “our” or “those of us” – especially in peer contexts <i>ex. When our immune system is weak</i> <i>ex. If we are taking Hep C medications; those of us who are taking HIV medications</i>
Protect <i>ex. Protect against HIV</i>	Prevent <i>ex. Prevent HIV from being passed</i>
Sexually transmitted disease (STD)	Sexually transmitted infection (STI) - infection is more accurate and less stigmatizing
“Healthy” when referring to people who are not living with HIV or Hep C <i>ex. People living with HIV and Hep C can have healthy children</i>	More specific language – people can be healthy whether or not we are living with HIV, Hep C, or other conditions <i>ex. People living with HIV and Hep C can have children who are HIV/HCV negative</i>
Guys <i>ex. Thanks guys for having YouthCO!</i>	Folks, friends, guests – words that are not gendered <i>ex. Folks, thanks so much for having YouthCO!</i>

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Breastmilk Breastfeeding	Human milk Chest feeding, nursing
Mother-to-child transmission <i>ex. We are seeing fewer cases of HIV happen through mother-to-child transmission.</i>	HIV passed at birth or through nursing – this phrasing makes assumptions about the gender of birth parents, and places blame/responsibility for transmission on the birth parent. <i>ex. Some youth became HIV-positive at birth or through nursing.</i>
Clean/dirty used to describe equipment or people	To describe people – abstinent, not using/actively using To describe equipment (e.g. needles) – new, unused/used
Gendered descriptions <i>ex. Female condoms</i> <i>ex. Pap smears are an important part of health care for women</i>	Body parts or actions <i>ex. Insertive condoms</i> <i>ex. Pap smears are an important part of health care for people with a cervix</i>
Prostitution	Sex work
Junkies, addicts, alcoholics, when used to describe other people	People who use drugs, people experiencing addiction, people with a substance use disorder (depending on what we're talking about; note, most of us use drugs whether that be caffeine, nicotine, etc.)
Homosexual; transsexual; identity-based slurs	Terms people use to self-identify <i>ex. gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, pansexual, etc.</i>
Judgments <i>ex. slut, promiscuous, crazy, dirty, bad</i>	Speaking neutrally about activities <i>ex. Having sex, using drugs</i>
Risk <i>ex. Using drugs is a risk activity for Hep C</i> <i>ex. Risk activities for HIV include...</i> <i>ex. Youth are at-risk for Hep C</i>	More specific language – “risk” is produced by inequities and systems of oppression, is often used as a label to exclude or stigmatize people, and portrays people as a source of virus or bacteria <i>ex. Sharing needles can pass Hep C</i> <i>ex. Activities that can pass HIV include...</i> <i>ex. Youth may come into contact with Hep C</i>
Normal <i>ex. Normal sex</i> <i>ex. A normal CD4 cell count is...</i>	More specific language – “normal” can be othering and exclusive <i>ex. Penis in vagina sex; sex where a mouth is on a bum, vulva, strapless</i> <i>ex. CD4 cell counts above 500 mean our immune system can fight off most infections</i>
Safe <i>ex. This is a safe space.</i> <i>ex. This is one way to have safe sex / safely inject</i>	Safer – “safe” is a subjective concept <i>ex. We work together to make this a safer space.</i> <i>ex. Safer sex can look like conversations with partners, or letting friends know where we are.</i>
Treatment as Prevention (TasP)	More specific language such as treatment, ARVs, medication, undetectable viral load that centres people living with HIV rather than public health prevention narratives.
“Newcomer” to describe someone who has lived in Canada for a long time	More specific language – Afro-Canadian Positive Network taught us that the word newcomer, used to refer to someone who has been in Canada a long time, can be othering

Please share far and wide, with credit to YouthCO and the organizations who have shared their knowledge with us! Find this inclusive language resource online at www.youthco.org/inclusivelanguage.