

# STI Awareness and Access to Information: Northeastern Youth's Perspectives

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Rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are high and rising among young people in Northeastern BC. Young people are rapidly in-migrating to this region for employment in the 'booming' oil/gas industries. Previous research has shown that youth's access to information regarding STIs and STI testing is an important determinant of STI status. Youth in other settings have identified the lack of age- and place-appropriate information as a factor that affects their sexual behaviours and access to STI testing (e.g., the locations of clinics are not always well advertised; campaigns designed for youth in one community may not be appropriate for another). Recent research has shown that young people in remote, oil/gas communities may have unique needs for information that they can access and identify with. This report, based on data collected in a Northeastern community, highlights youth's concerns regarding access to information regarding STIs and their suggestions for the ways in which information that better meets their needs may be provided.



## Current access to information

Youth explained that a lack of available information in their community regarding STIs perpetuated silence around sexual health issues and increased taboos associated with accessing information or services related to sexual health. Participants frequently discussed the invisibility of STI testing services in FSJ from this perspective:

*"You never hear of any advertisements for testing or anything like that, so [...] if you don't hear about it then it's out of your mind"* (Kaylee, 21 years old)

We were told that oil/gas workplaces are particularly devoid of sexual health information. Moreover, young workers highlighted how this reinforced the idea that STIs should not be discussed openly:

*"It's not a popular topic of conversation [on the rigs]. It's just not something you'd talk about, so if you don't really talk about it, it's not really on your mind and [you] don't really see posters or anything"*

(Kyle, 22 years old).

Young people explained that they did not know where they could go to access testing and did not feel comfortable consulting others for such information, something they described as a widespread concern among people in FSJ and surrounding oil/gas camps.

Most youth had never heard of STI testing offered through the public health unit and/or were unfamiliar with its location. Rather, most accessed sexual health services through walk-in clinics and the hospital. They discussed how the clinical interactions they had experienced within these settings did not involve the time necessary to ask questions or develop skills related to prevention. For example, one teenager described an occasion where she had accompanied a friend to the hospital for STI testing after a sexual encounter with an oil/gas worker:

*"They [the health care providers] printed off this piece of paper and then we looked at it. They just kind of pushed us away and we had to go. They didn't - they didn't talk about STDs or anything"*

(Rose, 16 years old).

Some youth consulted friends, family, and/or media sources for information about symptoms, risks, testing, and treatment, but highlighted the challenges in acquiring such knowledge in a place where very few opportunities exist for young people to openly ask questions about sexual health. They described the information they had received in school as limited and highly variable, since what is taught depends on the comfort and interest of teachers. As well, young people explained that this was often not perceived as a private venue within which to ask questions regarding sexuality (e.g., many explained that their teachers were related to them or were family friends).

Overall, youth and service providers described the local context of sexual health service provision as one which youth were expected to take the initiative to seek out information about STIs and testing options. To improve access, youth made a number of suggestions regarding the information they want and the ways in which it may be most effectively delivered.

## Facilitators to STI testing and prevention

Young men and women wanted to receive more information about STIs as well as **testing and treatment procedures** (e.g., that common bacterial STIs can be cured with free antibiotics), which they said would facilitate their access to sexual health services by **decreasing fear and uncertainty**. For example, one young man explained:

*“If you have more information, it does make it easier, like, if you know it’s not that bad to go and get yourself checked out, it’s not that bad to have the treatment for the symptoms.”*  
(Brody, 15 years old)

Youth also explained that information regarding **symptoms** (e.g., that many STIs can be asymptomatic; what symptoms to look out for) could facilitate timely access to STI testing and prevention resources. For example, Ann, a 21-year old college student, explained how her physician had accomplished this by letting her know about the high prevalence of Chlamydia in the region and its symptoms during a routine appointment. Ann explained how this provided an impetus for her to return

for testing if she developed symptoms in the future. In this way, she told us that providing this kind of information could facilitate testing. Youth stressed the need to increase the availability of information about STIs and local testing options which could be accessed in **privacy**. Some youth who had been recruited from the local youth centre noted that the provision of **free condoms and STI information** in the centre’s **washrooms** was an effective means of raising awareness and facilitating discussions with centre staff about testing.



## Media for raising awareness among youth

Youth suggested a variety of strategies for increasing awareness regarding STIs in Northeastern BC. While a small minority of participants obtained information about STIs from sources such as pamphlets, magazines, and books, they generally felt that information would be best provided through visually appealing materials with messaging that they could identify with, such as a **poster** with images of local youth. Youth explained that this medium could promote sexual health and reduce stigma by using **positive and healthy images of sexuality**. They stressed that posters should contain **locally relevant statistics** (e.g., STI prevalence among Northeastern youth) to ensure that youth in this region realize that STIs pertain to them. Youth thought that **messaging to reduce fear and stigma** (e.g., many STIs are curable; testing can be as simple as urinating in a cup) would increase the likelihood that they would get tested for STIs. They also explained the need for information on **where testing and information can be accessed locally**.

Young people suggested that awareness posters be displayed in **private locations** throughout the Northeast in places that are **frequented by young people** (e.g., the washrooms of bars, hotels, gyms, and restaurants). They also explained the need for awareness materials that could be taken with them, such as a **wallet card** (e.g., so that they could call from home to get information or book an appointment). Youth told us that making **condoms freely and privately available** in more locations would contribute to the effectiveness of an awareness campaign by breaking down stigma and promoting sexual health.

Oil/gas workers suggested that awareness materials (e.g., a wallet card, information sheet, and condoms) could be provided to them during the occupational **health and safety** sessions that they routinely attend. As well, they explained that these materials, as well as posters, should be made available in a variety of places at **oil/gas camps** (e.g., posters above the urinals in oil/gas camps; wallet cards in the coffee room; condoms in the washrooms) to promote awareness and increase access.



- *Youth-friendly posters around the community*
- *Distribution of portable information, such as wallet cards*
- *Extensive availability of free condoms*
- *Posters, wallet cards, and condoms distributed at oil/gas camps and health and safety training*

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