

Access to HIV self-testing kits expanded in York Region by CAYR and I'm Ready

As the global pandemic continues, a global epidemic rages on and is often undiagnosed: HIV.

This month, however, CAYR Community Connections and the I'm Ready research program, an initiative of the [REACH Nexus](#) research group, part of MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, St. Michael's Hospital, have partnered to break down the stigma surrounding the virus and increase access to free self-testing kits across York Region.

The aim of the St. Michael's pilot is to reach the undiagnosed with a goal of ending the epidemic in Canada, distributing 50,000 kits across Canada so people know their status and, if needed, are connected to care that can save lives.

Launched on June 2, users can access the program anonymously through [readytoknow.ca](#) and locally through CAYR Community Connections, formerly the AIDS Committee of York Region.

“When COVID started, we saw a number of sexual health services, particularly HIV testing, be impacted,” says Lorcan O'Donnell, Program Coordinator of Men's Health for CAYR. “We had a long period of really no testing happening in York, which placed a real barrier on folks just to get a test. Last November, Health Canada approved HIV testing to be used in Canada and we saw a great opportunity to try and get increased testing – increased opportunities and availability of testing for folks.

“Now, folks are able to order tests to be delivered straight to the location of their choosing, their house, community centre, wherever they like, but CAYR has a number of kits that are being provided and available for locals to pick up right from our offices.”

Persons interested in receiving one can sign up through the [I'm Ready, Test app](#). There, with their informed consent, they answer a few basic questions for the I'm Ready research program about their experiences with HIV testing and care. After taking the test, there are a few follow-up questions about taking the test and to see whether they have connected to care. I'm Ready also offers participants access to peer navigators before, during and after they self-test for HIV to support them with connecting to care.

“The stigma around HIV and, in particular, around sexual health testing generally is still very prevalent” with a lot of misinformation and miscommunication as to what happens during your test,” says O'Donnell. “Testing is really simple, easy, safe and effective. The only way to know your HIV status is to get a test. A lot of people would try to put off their test and not know about it; they bury their heads in the sand. We're really trying to [highlight] the only way you're going to be connected to care, whether that is preventative care if your test is negative or if you have a reactive test, they can connect you to treatment as soon as possible to try and get folks to get to an undetectable viral load, which means they can't pass HIV on to anyone else.

“We're trying to encourage folks to sign up for a test, which have been proven to be safe, effective and easy to use. It is something that someone can do in the privacy of their own home; they don't have to do it in front of a doctor or a nurse practitioner, which is something that is a barrier to some folks.”

For more information on the program, including a community information session set for July 12 from 6 – 7 p.m. on the kits themselves and the science behind them, visit [readytoknow.ca](#), or contact Lorcan O'Donnell at lodonnell@cayrcc.org.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter