

WEAIDS

HIV TESTING FAQs

WHAT KINDS OF TESTS ARE AVAILABLE?

There are several different types of HIV tests, but the two most common types are blood tests and oral swab tests.

HIV blood tests use a sample of blood, either from a finger prick or a larger sample often taken from the inner arm, to test for antibodies. Oral tests use a swab to collect cells from inside the mouth to test for HIV antibodies.

Traditional HIV test results can take one to two weeks to come back from a lab, but rapid tests are now widely available that can provide a result in about 20 minutes.

HOW DOES AN HIV TEST WORK?

Most HIV tests check for antibodies that the body produces once infected with HIV. Antibodies are proteins that the immune system produces to fight off all different kinds of infections, including HIV. If an HIV test detects HIV antibodies, a person is infected with HIV.

If antibodies are not present, a person is likely not HIV infected. But, it can take as long as three to six months for the body to develop enough antibodies to be measurable on a test. The time period between HIV exposure and a positive test is called the “window period,” during which you could test negative for HIV but still be infected with HIV and able to transmit the virus to others. Therefore, it is important to get tested (or re-tested) after a sufficient period of time has passed to know for sure.

WHO SHOULD GET TESTED FOR HIV?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends HIV testing for everyone between the ages of 13 and 64. This does not mean though that testing is done automatically when you see a health care provider even if you have blood drawn. The only way to know for sure you are being tested is to ask to be tested.

HIV testing is also recommended for all pregnant women as a routine part of prenatal care. A woman who has HIV and is pregnant can take certain medications during pregnancy that, combined with medical care, can significantly lower the chances of passing HIV to her baby.

IS AN HIV TEST PART OF MY ROUTINE PHYSICAL?

Even though HIV testing is recommended as part of routine medical care, many doctors do not offer testing for HIV (or other STDs) unless you specifically ask to be tested.

If you are not comfortable talking with your regular health care provider about HIV and other STDs, or if you don't have a regular health care provider, there are many clinics that specialize in testing.

WILL I BE TESTED FOR HIV IF I DONATE BLOOD?

When you donate blood, it is tested for HIV and other infections to make sure it is safe for others to receive. This kind of testing is why the blood supply of the United States and other developed countries is so safe. Any blood found to be unhealthy in some way is not used. Also, you cannot get infected with HIV from donating blood.

If you want to be sure of your HIV status, the best way to find out is not by donating blood but by getting an HIV test. The results from HIV testing are more timely, and a care provider can link you to the right kind of care and resources if you do test positive.

HOW MUCH DOES AN HIV TEST COST?

The cost of HIV testing varies. Community clinics that offer tests for free or on a sliding scale are available in most areas. Also, the cost of an HIV test may be covered by health insurance, if you have it. Call ahead to your doctor or local clinic to find out how they charge for HIV tests, or to your health insurance provider to see if the test is covered.

I TESTED NEGATIVE – NOW WHAT?

The most important thing to do if you test negative is to stay negative. Use condoms each and every time you have sex—vaginal, anal, or oral—no exceptions. Get tested regularly, talk to your partners about HIV and ask that they get tested with you. You want to make sure that they know you're watching out for their health and yours. If you use needles, don't share them.

WHAT IF I TEST POSITIVE FOR HIV?

With the availability of treatments today, you can lead a long and healthy life as an HIV positive person.

The most important thing to do if you test positive is to get connected with services and support as soon as possible. Advances in HIV/AIDS treatment are occurring all the time, and medical treatment and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay well much longer than in the early years of the epidemic. But, the longer you wait after testing positive to see a health care provider, the greater your chance of developing serious health problems.

If you've tested positive, here are some important steps to take to protect your health:

- See a doctor, even if you don't feel sick. If possible, see a doctor who has experience treating HIV. Consulting someone about your treatment options is the first step towards staying healthy.
- Find a support system. The emotional and physical challenges ahead can be difficult, and having people around to help is important. Ask your doctor about counselors and support groups that can help you.
- Talk with your partner(s). Tell your sexual partner/s about your HIV status and make sure you reduce your risk of transmitting the virus by practicing safer sex, including using latex condoms or dental dams each and every time you have sex.

WHAT ABOUT TREATMENT?

While there is not yet a cure, there are treatments available today that help those who are positive live longer and healthier lives. Even if you are not having symptoms, it is important to consult a health care provider about the best course of treatment. Once you begin treatment it is important to keep taking your medications exactly as prescribed, even if you don't feel sick, to avoid developing a resistance that may prevent medications from continuing to work for you.

WHO HAS ACCESS TO MY RESULTS?

Your HIV test results are confidential. The results will be included in your medical record, as are the results for any other type of test. If you test positive for HIV, your result will also be shared with your state's health department for purposes of monitoring trends in the HIV epidemic. Also, remember that if you do test positive, it is very important for you to work closely with your doctor to get the care and treatment you need.

You can also get tested anonymously, where your name is not linked to your test results. However, anonymous testing sites are not available in all states and at all locations. Home HIV finger prick tests, which you can purchase in a drug store or online, are also anonymous.