

## Fast facts about HIV testing and counselling

### What is a HIV test?

A HIV test is a test that reveals whether HIV is present in the body. Commonly-used HIV tests detect the antibodies produced by the immune system in response to HIV, as it is much easier (and cheaper) to detect antibodies than the virus itself. Antibodies are produced by the immune system in response to an infection.

For most people, it takes three months for these antibodies to develop. In rare cases, it can take up to six months. During this “window period” of early infection a person is at their most infectious.

### How long after possible exposure should I wait to be tested for HIV?

Generally, it is recommended that you wait three months after possible exposure before being tested for HIV. Although HIV antibody tests are very sensitive, there is a 'window period' of 3 to 12 weeks, which is the period between infection with HIV and the appearance of detectable antibodies to the virus. In the case of the most sensitive anti-HIV tests currently recommended, the window period is about three weeks. This period may be longer if less sensitive tests are used.

During the window period, people infected with HIV have no antibodies in their blood that can be detected by an HIV test. However, the person may already have high levels of HIV in their body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. HIV can be passed on to another person during the window period even though an HIV test may not show that you are infected with HIV.

### Why should I get a HIV test?

Knowing your HIV status has two vital benefits. Firstly, if you are HIV positive, you can take necessary steps before symptoms appear to access treatment, care and support services, thereby potentially prolonging your life for many years.

Secondly, if you know you are infected, you can take all the necessary precautions to prevent the spread of HIV to others.

Thirdly, your health care provider may recommend it, for example if you are pregnant and want to protect your unborn child. It may also be recommended by your health care provider if you are unwell, in order to obtain a more accurate medical assessment.

### Where can I get tested?

There are many places where you can be tested for HIV: in the offices of a private doctor, a local health department, hospitals, family planning clinics and sites specifically set up for HIV testing. Always try to find testing at a place where counselling is provided.

In some communities home-based counseling and testing are available and can include couples counseling and support for safe post test disclosure of results.

### **Are my test results confidential?**

The results of the HIV test must be kept absolutely confidential.

### **Consent**

Before you take a HIV test you must give informed consent prior to being tested. Ideally it is given individually, in private, in the presence of a health care provider. This means your health care provider should provide certain pre-test information to you and give you the opportunity for your questions to be answered.

### **Confidentiality**

There are different types of testing available:

**Confidential HIV test:** the medical professionals handling the HIV test keep the result of the test confidential within the medical records. Results cannot be shared with another individual unless written permission is provided by the person tested.

**Anonymous HIV test:** the tested person's name is not used in connection with the test. Instead, a code or number is assigned to the test, which allows the individual being tested to receive the results of the test. No records are kept that would link the person to the test.

Shared confidentiality is encouraged and refers to confidentiality that is shared with others that might include family members, loved ones, caregivers, and trusted friends.

However, care should be taken when revealing the results as it can lead to discrimination in healthcare, professional and social settings. Shared confidentiality is therefore at the discretion of the person who will be tested. Although the result of the HIV test should be kept confidential, other professionals such as counsellors and health and social service workers might also need to be aware of the person's HIV-positive status in order to provide appropriate care.

### **Counselling**

Every person who takes a HIV test must receive counselling when their test results are given, regardless of the test result. You should have access to post-test counselling regardless of the result of the HIV test. Pre test counselling was a core component of the original voluntary counselling and testing which was designed to assist clients to assess other personal risks and to identify practical strategies to cope with their test results. This model sees counselling and testing as both a primary and secondary prevention strategy (reducing risk of HIV exposure and onward transmission). However, in many settings pre-test group information now replaces individualized pre-test counselling.

### What do I do if I have HIV?

Thanks to new treatments, many people with HIV are living longer, healthier lives. It is very important to make sure you have a doctor who knows how to treat HIV. A health-care professional or trained HIV counsellor can provide counselling and help you to find an appropriate doctor.

Peer support can be very helpful for management of HIV – ask your counsellor.

In addition, you can do the following to stay healthy:

- Follow your doctor's instructions. Keep your appointments. If your doctor prescribes medicine for you, take it exactly as prescribed.
- Get immunizations to prevent infections such as pneumonia and flu (after consultation with your physician).
- Eat healthy foods and use safe drinking water.
- Exercise regularly to stay strong and fit.
- Get enough sleep and rest.

You should also try to:

- Access individual counselling that can give you information about prevention, care and treatment options.
- Seek support for disclosure to your partner and couples counselling.
- Follow-up with HIV testing and counselling for your partners and children.
- Follow your doctor's advice on safer sex and risk reduction.
- Get screening and treatment for other diseases including TB, malaria and other sexually transmitted infections.

If you are pregnant, it is important that you get information on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission and advice on infant feeding

### What does it mean if I test negative for HIV?

A negative test result means that no HIV antibodies were found in your blood at the time of testing. If you are negative, make sure you stay that way: learn the facts about HIV transmission and prevention avoid engaging in unsafe behaviour – see “[Fast facts about HIV prevention](#)” for more information.

However, there is still a possibility of being infected, since it can take up to three months for your immune system to produce enough antibodies to show infection in a blood test. It is advisable to be re-tested at a later date, and to take appropriate precautions in the meantime. During the window period, a person is highly infectious, and should therefore take measures to prevent any possible transmission.