

WHAT IS AN HIV TEST AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK FOR?

HIV is detectable by a blood test. The test tells you if you are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) by looking for antibodies. HIV antibodies are produced by your immune system in response to HIV being present in your blood.

WHO SHOULD GET TESTED FOR HIV?

For some people, HIV testing is a regular part of their health care routine, while for others, an HIV test is something they have neither had nor considered having. There are many reasons to get an HIV test and different people test for different reasons. For example, you may consider a test if: you are having unprotected sex; a condom broke; you are sharing needles; you have been diagnosed for another sexually transmitted infection (STI), or you know or believe that your partner(s) are involved in high-risk activities. HIV testing is the only way to know your HIV status.

WHEN SHOULD I GET TESTED?

If you feel you may have engaged in a risk activity, such as unprotected sex or sharing an intravenous needle, you may want to consider an HIV test. In British Columbia, HIV tests can detect antibodies within four weeks to three months following point of infection. This is called the “window period”. If you think you were exposed to HIV, you should wait at least four weeks before getting an HIV test. If you do not wait until your window period is over, an antibody test may give an inaccurate result and therefore an individual can still transmit the virus to others if infected. A negative HIV result is confirmed after the three month period. If you participated in another risk activity during the window period, you should wait another four weeks for an accurate result.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF TESTING?

HIV testing is available for FREE at community health clinics, sexual health clinics and from your family doctor. Family planning centers or drug treatment facilities also offer testing.

When testing an individual can choose between having nominal (your full and actual name) and non-nominal testing (fake name or initials).

Non-nominal testing will not be attached to your medical history. Once a person has decided to test for HIV, the process should proceed as follows:

- ▶ **Step 1:** Pre-test counselling takes place.
- ▶ **Step 2:** A blood sample is collected and sent to a laboratory.
- ▶ **Step 3:** An Elisa test is used at the lab to test for HIV antibodies.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Test results are usually available within one to two weeks (ten business days).
- ▶ **Step 5:** Positive test is confirmed with a Western blot test. A negative test is confirmed if done following the three month window period.
- ▶ **Step 6:** Post-test counselling should take place for either a positive or negative result.

HOW ACCURATE ARE THE TESTS?

The Elisa test is the first antibody test to be administered after the window period and has an accuracy rate of 99.5%. After three months, a positive test result can be confirmed by the Western blot test which will provide a result that is 99.9% accurate. The p-24 antigen test is another test which can detect an HIV protein, the p-24, before antibodies are produced, reducing the “window period”. It is mainly used to screen blood supplies.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER HIV TESTS, LIKE ‘RAPID’ HIV TESTING’?

There are some HIV tests that are not blood tests and can detect HIV antibodies via mouth fluid (not saliva), urine, or from a sample scraped from inside the cheek. Currently, rapid testing is only available in certain provinces and in certain settings in Canada. Should a positive result be determined by a rapid HIV test, it is recommended to confirm that result with a secondary blood test.

WHAT DOES THE TEST MEAN AND CAN I KEEP THE RESULT CONFIDENTIAL?

All test results are confidential and must be delivered in person. You should not get your positive or negative result over the phone or by email. A positive test result means that you have HIV antibodies and are infected with HIV. A health care provider will give you information and options on what to do next and how to access services and support.

A negative test result means that you have not been exposed to HIV and you are not infected with HIV (provided you have not participated in a risk activity since testing). You now have the opportunity to learn and continue to practice HIV prevention, protecting yourself and others from STIs.

REPORTABILITY

HIV is a reportable disease in British Columbia. This means if you test negative or positive for HIV, the results are confidentially reported and maintained for statistical purposes by the provincial health ministry. If you test positive, voluntary partner notification process is implemented. A health care provider or reportability nurse assists the positive person with informing sexual or needle sharing partners of their potential risk of HIV infection. Partner counselling can encourage individuals who did not consider themselves at risk to seek HIV testing and follow up with treatment if they are positive. This process is done in a confidential manner so that anonymity for the positive person is maintained.

OTHER TESTS

When you know you are HIV positive, two tests are administered at regular intervals. A viral load test is used to measure how much HIV is in your body. A CD4 test measures the number of healthy immune cells in a sample of blood. Health care providers measure CD4 cells to determine various actions such as: when to begin, interrupt, or halt anti-HIV therapy; when to give preventive treatment for opportunistic infections; and when to measure an individual's response to treatment. The lower the CD4 count and the higher the viral load, the increased risk of an individual developing an opportunistic infection. The healthy range for a CD4 cell count is: 500 -1500.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- ▶ **Avert:** www.avert.org/testing.htm
- ▶ **National HIV Testing Resources:** www.hivtest.org
- ▶ **San Francisco AIDS Foundation:** www.sfaf.org/aids101/hiv_testing.html