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Patient information: Testing for HIV (Beyond the Basics)

Author

John G Bartlett, MD

Section Editor

Martin S Hirsch, MD

Deputy Editor

Allyson Bloom, MD

HIV TESTING OVERVIEW

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) testing is used to determine if you are infected with HIV. Many individuals who are at the highest risk for HIV have not been tested, usually because they do not realize that they are at risk. Others avoid testing because they are worried about the possibility of a positive test result.

However, testing is encouraged because treatment for HIV is highly effective and early diagnosis can improve your chances of living longer and being healthier. Furthermore, knowing your HIV status can greatly reduce your risk of passing HIV to others if you take precautions.

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV is a virus that weakens your body's immune system, making it difficult to fight infections and certain cancers. People who are infected with HIV may have no signs or symptoms of their illness, but can still pass the infection to others through sexual contact or through exposure to contaminated needles. If HIV is not treated, you will eventually become very ill and may die. The advanced stage of HIV infection is called AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

RISK FACTORS FOR HIV INFECTION

Nearly all HIV infections are acquired through sexual contact or exposure to contaminated needles.

You are at risk for getting HIV from sex if you have:

- Had a sexually transmitted disease
- Had a sexual partner infected with HIV
- Been a victim of sexual assault (see "[Patient information: Care after sexual assault \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)")
- Had unprotected sex with multiple partners
- Exchanged sex for money or drugs or have sex partners who do

You are at risk for exposure to HIV through contaminated needles if you have:

- Injected drugs with shared needles or "works"
- Been accidentally stuck with a needle or sharp in a healthcare facility

Many people who have HIV have not been tested because they do not consider themselves at risk for infection.

Who should be tested for HIV — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend HIV testing for everyone between age 13 and 64 years. There are two reasons for this recommendation:

- The treatment of HIV is highly effective. People with HIV can live a nearly normal lifetime with currently available drugs. This treatment is most effective when it is started early in the course of the disease, before symptoms develop.
- Treating HIV can help prevent the spread of infection to others. If you know you are infected, you can change your behavior so you are less likely to put other people at risk.

HIV TESTING METHODS

There are several methods to test for HIV. All positive tests are confirmed with another test.

Rapid tests — Rapid tests for HIV use saliva or blood from a finger prick. These tests provide results within 5 to 40 minutes and are useful because they do not require that you go back on another day for your results. A positive result requires another test to confirm the result, but most positive test results will be confirmed with additional testing. A negative test does not have to be confirmed.

Standard tests — The standard HIV test uses a sample of blood taken from a vein. The results are usually available in a few days.

Anonymous testing — Anonymous testing allows you to be tested without disclosing your identity, and is offered in some areas. To locate a clinic that provides anonymous HIV testing in the United States, call 1-800-750-2016.

Home testing — Home test kits provide accurate and anonymous results and are available in most pharmacies. The kit requires a small sample of blood, obtaining by pricking the finger. The blood is blotted on a filter strip and mailed to a lab. The lab performs the test and calls you with the result. The results of the test are confidential and are not reported to anyone but you.

HIV TESTING PROCEDURE

Frequency of testing — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend an HIV test for all people between age 13 and 64, and a repeat test if you have new risk factors, such as a new sexual partner. People who are at high risk for HIV, such as men who have sex with men, injection drug users, and those with multiple sex partners or a partner known to be HIV- infected should be tested every 6 to 12 months.

If you are worried that you were exposed to HIV recently, you should be tested now, with a repeat HIV test at 6, 12, and 24 weeks after the potential exposure. (See "[Patient information: Symptoms of HIV infection \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

