



**HIV Anti-body Test**  
(commonly Known as the AIDS Test)

## **THINKING OF HAVING A TEST?**

There are lots of things to think about before deciding to have a test. This document looks at some of the problems you may be facing as well as giving information about what the test is, how to have a test, and what the result means.

Before making a decision, it is strongly recommended that you talk to an experienced counsellor about your particular situation. Everyone is different and everyone has a different set of questions to face. Discussing these questions with someone who understands how a test can affect you will give you much more confidence to make the right decision.

Ensure that you can have such a test with strict confidentiality. Check into the situation in your town or city.

## **HAVE YOU BEEN AT RISK?**

HIV is the virus which can lead to AIDS. It can only be transmitted in a limited number of ways.

If someone is infected with HIV their blood, semen or vaginal fluid may carry enough HIV to infect other people. HIV can only be passed from an infected person to someone else if blood, semen or vaginal fluid passes into their blood stream. There are four ways in which this can happen:

1. Having penetrative sex (either vaginal or anal) without a condom. Using a condom can protect you and your sex partner from HIV.
2. Sharing needles or other injecting equipment.

If you're injecting you should always use new equipment every time.

Tattooists should always use sterilised equipment and fresh ink.

3. From mother to baby during pregnancy.
4. Through infected blood and blood products entering the blood stream.

Giving oral sex (licking or sucking a man or woman's genitals) carries a small risk of HIV transmission.

## **WHAT DOES THE TEST MEAN?**

Often the HIV anti-body test is called an AIDS test. But it is not a test for AIDS. AIDS is just a name for a collection of diseases which develop because the body's immune system breaks down. This is caused by a virus - HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. The test will tell you whether or not you have HIV, the virus which can cause AIDS. It will not tell you that you have AIDS.

If you do have HIV you may still be perfectly well. You may stay well for a long time.

The test is not for HIV itself, but for antibodies to the virus. When any virus enters your body, body tries to destroy it. One of the ways it does this is by making special killer substances called antibodies. For reasons not fully understood HIV antibodies do not destroy HIV.

When HIV enters someone's bloodstream, these antibodies may not appear straight away. In most people the antibodies appear six weeks after infection. It can take three months for antibodies to appear, and clinics will advise you to have your test at least three months after the time you could have become infected. Some people request a further test at six months as confirmation that infection has not occurred.

## **DECIDING WHETHER TO TEST**

### **Knowing**

Perhaps you want to get tested because you want to know for sure

whether you have HIV or not. You may feel that knowing as much as possible about your life gives you more control. You might be confident that you are not infected but feel the need to be absolutely sure. Perhaps you are worried that you are HIV positive. This may be because of a particular reason or it may just be a general fear.

Not knowing your HIV status can be very stressful. You may feel that knowing the result, whether it is positive or negative, will help you make decisions about the direction of your life.

On the other hand, you might feel that not knowing is better. You may decide that a positive test result would be much harder to deal with than the worry of not knowing.

Living with HIV can be very difficult to come to terms with. If you are not ill you may stay well for many years. We don't know yet whether everyone with HIV will eventually develop AIDS. But living with the knowledge that you may get ill at any time can be challenging and hard.

This can be a very difficult choice to make. Whether or not you know your HIV status, you can help protect yourself and your partners by practising safer sex and safer drug use.

## **GOING FOR A TEST**

### **Preparing for a Test**

An HIV test can have a huge impact on your life. Before deciding to have a test think carefully about your reasons for wanting one and how the different possible results will affect you.

There may be people you want to talk to and get support from. But think first about how your test result could affect them and your relationships with them.

Going for a test can be very stressful and traumatic. Taking someone with you can be very reassuring. Make sure you choose someone you feel you can trust with your test result.

## **Where to Go**

There are a growing number of private clinics which will conduct the test. Also there may be several government centres which will also conduct the test. Find out how good and reliable they are, how much they respect confidentiality, and whether they can conduct the test anonymously.

## **What to Expect**

The test itself only requires a sample of your blood to be taken. This sample will be used for several separate tests to make sure the result is correct. The doctor may ask personal questions of you.

You may have to wait for up to three weeks for the result.

## **A NEGATIVE RESULT**

A negative result can mean either that you do not have HIV or that you have not yet developed antibodies to HIV.

Remember that this is a test for antibodies to HIV. Antibodies may not appear until three months after infection.

But remember, a negative result today is no protection against HIV infection tonight.

## **A POSITIVE RESULT**

However well you have prepared yourself, the most common reaction to a positive diagnosis is one of shock. This can take many forms, from feeling euphoric - "I knew anyway", to total despair. It can take time for the news to sink in, and longer for you to come to terms with what it means to you. Make sure that you have a supportive network and/or agency to help give guidance.

## **Dealing with the Result**

Accepting a positive diagnosis can be very difficult for you and those around you, even if you have talked it through beforehand. You will

be faced with the dilemma of who else should know about your result. It's a good idea to allow yourself a lot of time in deciding who to tell. Think about whether others will pass on the information without asking you. This includes partners, family friends, and people at work. Remember there is no need to rush. In the meantime you will be able to talk about your result with a counsellor if you want to. Then, when you are ready, you can choose who else to tell.

One problem faced by a lot of people is that in telling family, partners and friends about their positive status they may also have to deal with questions about their sexual and/or drug taking behaviour. This can be very difficult. Talking this through with a professional counsellor can be very useful, whether or not you have the support of those close to you, but especially if you don't. This can be done in complete confidence and may help you deal with your situation in a way that is best for you as an individual. Seeking this help is not a sign of weakness or of being unable to cope. It is actually the first step towards coming to terms with your diagnosis.

### **What Does a Positive Result Mean?**

A positive result tells you that you have HIV but does not tell you anything about the state of your health. People with HIV can experience a range of different conditions from well and healthy to life-threatening illness. It is impossible to predict the course of any individual's infection.

### **Looking After Yourself**

One of the most important things to think about is having good medical back-up.

### **Treatments**

One of the potential benefits of knowing your status if you are HIV positive is that you can have your health monitored and take measures to look after yourself.

### **Keeping Healthy**

There are other measures you can take to look after yourself if you are HIV positive, such as a healthy diet and taking exercise. Herpes, stress, poor diet, drugs, alcohol, smoking and poppers are some of

the things believed to increase the risk of someone with HIV developing AIDS. It makes sense to avoid as many of these as possible, though stopping things like smoking and drinking at such a stressful time may be counter-productive if it makes you miserable.

## **Sex**

Being HIV positive can change your feelings about sex, but does not mean you have to make drastic changes to your sex life. Safer sex will protect your partner from HIV, and will protect you from any sexually transmitted disease which might harm you. Safer sex is the same whether you are positive or negative.

Condoms, if used properly, are an effective barrier against HIV when used in anal and vaginal penetrative sex. Oral sex is very much safer than penetrative sex without a condom. If you want to be extra careful, use a condom.

Kissing, licking, body rubbing and mutual masturbation are safe but sex toys (e.g. vibrators or dildos) shouldn't be shared.

Rimming (oral-anal contact), whilst unlikely to transmit HIV, may be unwise for someone with HIV because of the risk from hepatitis, parasites or intestinal infections. A vaccine against hepatitis B is available which can be given to someone with HIV infection.

Whether to inform sexual partners of your HIV status can be a difficult question. If you have safer sex every time you may feel you don't need to tell people. Or you may feel more conformable if you do.

It could be that you go off sex altogether at first. This is a common and normal reaction. However, if this becomes distressing it could mean that you need some help working through it.

## **Wives and children**

If you are married, and your are tested positive, then you will need to have your wife, If you children are young, they too may need to be tested. Seek support from your counsellor as the best way to deal with this issue.

## **Risks to Children**

Being cared for by someone with HIV poses no special risk of infection to a baby or child. HIV is not passed on in food prepared by someone with HIV. Any amount of kissing and cuddling is perfectly all right.

*adapted from a Terrence Higgins Trust, UK brochure  
produced to support male sexual health initiatives*