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HIV Overview

HIV Testing

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Key Points

- HIV testing shows whether a person has HIV. HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is the virus that causes [AIDS \(acquired immunodeficiency syndrome\)](#). AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection.
- The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) recommends that everyone 13 to 64 years old get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine health care and that people at higher risk for HIV get tested more often.
- Risk factors for HIV include having vaginal or anal sex with someone who is HIV positive or whose HIV status you don't know; having sex with many partners; and injecting drugs and sharing needles, syringes, or other drug equipment with others.
- CDC recommends that all pregnant women get tested for HIV so that they can begin taking HIV medicines if they are HIV positive.

What is HIV testing?

HIV testing shows whether a person has HIV. HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is the virus that causes [AIDS \(acquired immunodeficiency syndrome\)](#). AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection.

HIV testing can detect HIV infection, but it can't tell how long a person has had HIV or if the person has AIDS.

Why is HIV testing important?

Knowing your HIV status can help keep you—and others—safe.

If you are HIV negative:

Testing shows that you don't have HIV. Continue taking steps to avoid getting HIV, such as using condoms during sex and, if you are at high risk of getting HIV, taking medicines to prevent HIV (called [pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP](#)). For more information, read the *AIDSinfo* [fact sheet on HIV prevention](#).

If you are HIV positive:

Testing shows that you have HIV, but you can still take steps to protect your health. Begin by talking to your health care provider about [antiretroviral therapy \(ART\)](#). People on ART take a combination of HIV medicines every day to treat HIV infection. ART is recommended for everyone who has HIV, and people with HIV should start ART as soon as possible. ART can't cure HIV, but HIV medicines help people with HIV live longer, healthier lives.

A main goal of ART is to reduce a person's [viral load](#) to an undetectable level. An [undetectable viral load](#) means that the level of HIV in the blood is too low to be detected by a viral load test. People with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of transmitting HIV to their HIV-negative partner through sex.

Who should get tested for HIV?

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) recommends that everyone 13 to 64 years old get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine health care. As a general rule, people at higher risk for HIV should get tested each year. Sexually active gay and bisexual men may benefit from getting tested more often, such as every 3 to 6 months.

Factors that increase the risk of HIV include:

- Having vaginal or anal sex with someone who is HIV positive or whose HIV status you don't know
- Injecting drugs and sharing needles, syringes, or other drug equipment with others
- Exchanging sex for money or drugs
- Having a [sexually transmitted disease \(STD\)](#), such as [syphilis](#)
- Having [hepatitis](#) or [tuberculosis \(TB\)](#)
- Having sex with anyone who has any of the HIV risk factors listed above

Talk to your health care provider about your risk for HIV and how often you should get tested for HIV.

Should pregnant women get tested for HIV?

CDC recommends that all pregnant women get tested for HIV so that they can begin taking HIV medicines if they are HIV positive. Women with HIV take HIV medicines during pregnancy and childbirth to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and to protect their own health. For more information, read the *AIDSinfo* fact sheet on [Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV](#).

What are the types of HIV tests?

There are three types of tests used to diagnose HIV infection: antibody tests, antigen/antibody tests, and nucleic acid tests (NATs). How soon each test can detect HIV infection differs, because each test has a different [window period](#). The window period is the time between when a person may have been exposed to HIV and when a test can accurately detect HIV infection.

- **Antibody tests** check for HIV antibodies in blood or oral fluid. HIV antibodies are disease-fighting proteins that the body produces in response to HIV infection. Most [rapid tests](#) and home use tests are antibody tests.
- **Antigen/antibody tests** can detect both HIV antibodies and HIV antigens (a part of the virus) in blood.
- **NATs** look for HIV in the blood.

A person's initial HIV test will usually be either an antibody test or an antigen/antibody test. NATs are very expensive and not routinely used for HIV screening unless the person had a high-risk exposure or a possible exposure with early symptoms of HIV infection.

When an HIV test is positive, a follow-up test will be conducted. Sometimes people will need to visit a health care provider to take a follow-up test. Other times the follow-up test may be performed in a lab using the same blood sample that was provided for the first test. A positive follow-up test confirms that a person has HIV.

Talk to your health care provider about your HIV risk factors and the best type of HIV test for you.

Is HIV testing confidential?

HIV testing can be confidential or anonymous.

Confidential testing means that your HIV test results will include your name and other identifying information, and the results will be included in your medical record. HIV-positive test results will be reported to local or state health departments to be counted in statistical reports. Health departments remove all personal information (including names and addresses) from HIV test results before sharing the information with CDC. CDC uses this information for reporting purposes and does not share this information with any other organizations, including insurance companies.

Anonymous testing means you don't have to give your name when you take an HIV test. When you take the test, you receive a number. To get your HIV test results, you give the number instead of your name.

Where can I get tested for HIV?

Your health care provider can give you an HIV test. HIV testing is also available at many hospitals, medical clinics, substance use programs, and community health centers. Use this [CDC testing locator](#) to find an HIV testing location near you.

You can also buy a home testing kit at a pharmacy or online.

This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

- From CDC: [HIV Basics: Testing](#)
- From CDC: [HIV Testing](#)
- From CDC: [Home Tests](#)