

Taking the HIV test





What is HIV?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an infection that gradually destroys the body's defences – the immune system – making it difficult to fight off other infections and cancers. Severe damage to the immune system is called AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome).

It can take many years before someone who catches HIV becomes sick. During this time they will feel well and may not know they are infected.

Have you been at risk of infection?

Unprotected sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is now the commonest way that people become infected with HIV. Using a condom will reduce your risk of catching HIV and other more common sexually transmitted diseases.

Oral sex may put you at some risk of infection.

Sharing needles, syringes and other drug works (spoons, filters, etc) is very risky.

HIV can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn baby, but with proper treatment this can be prevented in most cases.

You cannot catch HIV from hugging, kissing, sharing a cup or toilet seats!

What is the HIV test?

When you are infected with HIV the body produces antibodies to try and fight off the virus. It is these antibodies that the HIV test detects. If they are found in the blood – a positive test result – it means you are infected with HIV.

It takes the body about 3 months to produce the antibodies. It is important to think if you have done something risky less than 3 months ago – in this case you should wait before having the test or have a repeat test in 3 months.

If your test is **NEGATIVE** it means that:

- You do not have antibodies in your blood and, unless you have been at risk in the last 3 months, you have not been infected with HIV
- If you have been at risk within the last 3 months you will be advised to repeat the test
- You should think about why you were at risk of HIV this time – you could still become infected if you place yourself at risk again. How can you avoid this? No-one is immune from HIV

What does a **POSITIVE** test mean?

- You are HIV-positive and have been infected with HIV
- It does not mean that you have AIDS
- It does not tell you how long you have been infected with HIV
- It does not tell you what damage, if any, has been done to your immune system
- You will be offered ongoing help, support and treatment
- You can take precautions to avoid infecting other people



Should you have a test?

This is a big decision and it is always best to discuss it fully with a doctor or counsellor before you decide. There is no simple answer – it depends on you and your circumstances. Some of the issues you need to think about are:

Have I been at risk?

There is no good reason to test if you have not been at risk. Look at the risks on the previous page – could you have been exposed to HIV?

What are the disadvantages of being tested?

Some people feel they would rather not know that they are HIV positive. You may feel that you could not cope with the result at the moment. Remember taking the test doesn't cause HIV infection and most people do cope with the diagnosis, even if they thought they couldn't.

Unfortunately some people still experience prejudice and discrimination around their HIV status and this can lead to problems with employment and travel as well as family and friends. Ask about this before you decide to take the test. Self-help groups and other agencies can offer support if you run into problems because of your diagnosis.

If you have a positive test you may have problems with life assurance and some mortgages. Insurance taken out before a test will not be affected although most newer policies specifically exclude HIV related illness from their cover. A negative test result should not affect your ability to get insurance.



What are the advantages of being tested?

A negative test result can be a huge relief from worry and will allow you to think about how to avoid becoming infected in the future.

If the test is positive you will be offered monitoring and can get treatment to slow down the damage caused by the virus. There is no cure for HIV but treatment can keep you well for a long time.

Although treatment is much better given before you have symptoms due to HIV, it can be helpful at any stage. Early testing allows you to make the best decision about treatment for you.

If you know you are infected you can protect other people, such as your sexual partner, from risk of infection.

If you are pregnant, or want to be, you can protect your unborn child.



Going for an HIV test

- Is this the right time for you to go for a test?
- Could you cope with a positive test result at the moment?
- Remember also that if you have been at risk in the last 3 months you may need to wait to have a test or have a repeat test.

All services are confidential and will not disclose the result to anyone else without your consent.

It can be stressful to go alone – think about taking a friend you trust for support.

Think about who you would tell if you got a positive result – and who you would not tell. If you tell people you are having a test they will probably ask you about the result.

You are going to discuss having a test – it is up to you in the end whether you decide to go ahead or not.



Where can I get tested?

Genito-Urinary Medicine

Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh
Mon-Fri, advice and
appointments,
Tel. 0131-536 2103 (men)
Tel. 0131-536 2104 (women)

Same day testing, where you
take the test and receive the
result on the same day is
available at the HIV
Counselling Clinic and
GUM by appointment.

HIV Counselling Clinic

Ward 41
Western General Hospital
Edinburgh
Tel 0131-537 2864

West Lothian HIV Counselling Clinic

Livingston
Tel 01506 414586

Family Planning Clinic

Dean Terrace
By appointment
Tel 0131-537 8300

Your GP

Your GP can offer confidential HIV
testing. If they know you well they
may be the best person to advise you
on whether to have a test or not.
Although the test will be recorded
in your medical records your GP will
not disclose your result to anyone
without your permission.

If you are HIV-positive and apply for
life assurance you will have to tell
them, even if your GP
does not know.



Primary Care Facilitator Team (HIV/Drugs)
22-24 Spittal Street, Edinburgh EH3 9DU

