

HIV testing

It is advisable to be tested for HIV if you are at risk of becoming infected with the virus. Early detection and treatment helps a person with HIV to stay healthy, delay the onset of complications, including AIDS, and reduce the spread of infection in the community.

Medications are now available in many parts of the world to control HIV and maintain a person's healthy immune system. While these medications do not cure the virus, they help people living with HIV to stay healthy.

It can take a number of years for a person who becomes infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) to develop AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) if they do not receive treatment.

How HIV is spread

Some of the ways HIV is transmitted include:

- **Unprotected anal sex (without a condom) between two males** – this activity has a high risk of HIV infection.
- **Sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment.**
- **Unprotected anal or vaginal sex between men and women** – the incidence of HIV among this group in Australia is still relatively low, but having sex with someone who is from or has had sex in a country where there is a higher incidence of HIV carries an increased risk.
- **Blood transfusions and treatment with other blood products** – in Australia (between 1980 and May 1985) or in other countries where there are higher rates of HIV.
- **Unprotected sex with male or female sex workers** – in countries with a high rate of HIV infection or who do not work in licensed brothels.
- **Unprotected oral sex (male and female)** – this activity has an extremely low transmission rate and infection is unlikely.
- **From a mother who has HIV to a child** – during pregnancy, birth or when breastfeeding. The risk of transmission can be dramatically reduced if the mother takes antiretroviral medication as recommended by her doctor. She may also be advised not to breastfeed.

Countries where there is a high rate of HIV infection include South East Asian countries (such as Thailand and Cambodia), India, many African countries, the Caribbean, parts of China, Papua New Guinea, Eastern Europe and parts of the USA (such as New York and San Francisco).

An increased risk of HIV infection

You can become infected with HIV even if you participate in a high-risk activity only once. However, the more people you have unprotected sex with or the more times you participate in activities where HIV transmission is possible, the greater your chance of becoming infected.

A blood test can show if you have HIV

A blood test can detect HIV antibodies and determine if you are infected with the virus. HIV antibodies are produced by the body of a person with HIV. If your blood test shows that antibodies are present, you are 'HIV positive'. If you have no antibodies in your blood, you are 'HIV negative'. Testing should be voluntary and only carried out with informed consent, except in exceptional circumstances.

There is a short period (six to 12 weeks depending on the type of test used by the laboratory) where a person may have been infected by HIV but the HIV antibodies can't be detected in their blood. This is often referred to as the "window period" and the person may be required to have a follow-up blood test to be absolutely sure the result is accurate.

Preparing for the HIV antibody test

When you attend for testing, you should receive information, be made aware of your risk and have discussed the possible outcomes of the test. If you do not understand something, ask the doctor or nurse who is ordering your test.

A positive result can lead to feelings of shock, anger, distress and depression. Everybody who is tested should:

- First talk to an experienced medical practitioner, counsellor or nurse so you can consider what a positive test may mean for you – the clinician should also talk to you about your level of risk and the likelihood that the test may be positive
- Be offered ongoing counselling if the test is positive
- Be counselled about how to protect sexual partners and others by avoiding activities that could pass on the virus.

If the HIV test is positive

If tests show that you have HIV (are 'HIV positive'), you will be offered:

- **Further tests** – to determine how healthy your immune system is. People with HIV usually have regular blood tests to monitor the health of their immune system.
- **Antiviral drugs** – most people do not require these when they are first diagnosed with HIV. When your blood tests indicate the HIV virus is multiplying in the body more rapidly and affecting your immune system, your doctor will talk to you about taking medications to manage the infection. These medications aim to keep a person living with HIV healthy. They do not cure the virus.
- **Counselling** – to assist you to understand more about HIV and what this means for you; especially in relation to relationships, pregnancy, career and other long-term plans. Counselling can also help you with making changes to your lifestyle that improve resistance to illness. This may include diet, exercise, stress reduction or stopping smoking or drug use.

Treatments are sometimes needed early in the course of infection, so it is important to have a test to find out whether you have HIV.

If the HIV test is negative

Follow-up counselling can help people at risk to make changes to sexual or drug-taking practices so they can stay HIV negative.

Test results are kept confidential

Under Victorian law, it is unlawful to discriminate against anyone who has HIV. Test results, and the fact that you have been tested at all, are kept confidential.

Where to take a HIV test

A blood sample can be taken by:

- Your doctor
- Doctors and nurses working in sexual health, community health clinics or other medical services.

The results of the test are usually available within seven days.

Costs of HIV testing

Some private pathology services charge a small fee for HIV testing. People at high risk for HIV will be tested free of charge at sexual health and community health centres. Those considered at higher risk for HIV include:

- Men who have sex with men.
- Women who have sex with a man who has sex with other men or with a man who has had sex in a country where there is a higher incidence of HIV.
- Men who have sex with a woman who has either had sex in or is from a country where there is a higher incidence of HIV.
- Women who have sex with a woman from a country where there is a higher incidence of HIV.
- Sex workers who do not work in licensed brothels.
- People who inject drugs.
- People with other sexually transmissible infections (STIs) – these may increase the risk of acquiring HIV.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Your local community health centre
- Positive Living Centre Tel. (03) 9525 5866
- People Living with HIV/AIDS Vic Tel. (03) 9863 8733
- Victorian AIDS Council/Gay Men's Health Centre Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840

Things to remember

- Early testing for HIV helps people to stay healthy and reduces the spread of infection in the community.
- When you go for a HIV test you should receive information, be made aware of your risk and have discussed the possible outcomes of the test. If you do not understand something, ask the doctor or nurse who is ordering your test.
- Consider being tested if you have had unprotected sex or have shared needles.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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