

AIDS, the test : yes or no? / Health Education Authority.

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HEALTH EDUCATION AUTHORITY

AIDS THE TEST

**YES
OR
NO** ? This leaflet
is for anyone
who is thinking
of having a
blood test

called the HIV antibody test. It tells you all about the test and explains what the results mean. It also raises some of the issues you might want to think about before you decide whether to have the test.

WHAT IS THE TEST?

When the body is infected by HIV, it reacts by producing antibodies. The test looks for these antibodies.

It is NOT a test for AIDS.

It will only tell you whether or not you have been infected by the virus. The test will NOT tell you if you have AIDS, and cannot predict whether you will go on to develop AIDS.

What does the test involve?

A doctor or nurse will take a sample of blood – usually from your arm – and then sends it to a laboratory for the HIV antibody test. Because the laboratory has to confirm the test, it will be about two weeks before you get your results.

How to take the test

If, after thinking and talking it over, you decide to take the test, you can ask your GP to arrange it for you. Or, you can contact a clinic anywhere in the UK. These clinics are listed in the phone book under Sexually Transmitted Diseases, or Genito-urinary Medicine, or Venereal Diseases. There is no charge.

The result, and the fact you have been tested, is confidential between you and the doctor requesting the test and other staff immediately concerned with your care. It may be difficult to keep the result confidential if you tell friends you are having the test. They will want to know the result.

The result will not be given to anyone but you. You should make another appointment at the clinic because it is important to talk to someone about the result, whether or not your test shows that you have been infected by HIV.

The best defence against HIV and AIDS is information. Read this leaflet as many times as you need to, and/or talk to an advisor at an STD clinic or the National AIDS helpline, before you make a decision about having the test.

WHAT DOES THE RESULT TELL YOU?

If the test does not find antibodies to the virus in your blood, you have probably not been infected with HIV.

However, it can take 2-3 months for antibodies to develop after you have been infected with the virus. This means that you should wait up to 3 months after the last occasion when you think you have been infected before you have the test. And of course, a negative result does not mean you cannot become infected in future if you put yourself at risk.

If the test does find antibodies to the virus in your blood it means that you have the virus. It does not mean that you have AIDS, or that you will necessarily get AIDS.

It does mean that you are infectious and can pass the virus on to other people through sexual contact or blood – even though you may look and feel well.

It does not mean that you can infect someone by normal, everyday contact. Working, eating, drinking or sharing a house with people are all quite safe.

REMEMBER

Safer sex for everyone

Stay with one partner. If this is not possible, reduce your number of sexual partners and always make sure a condom is used during penetrative sexual intercourse.

Don't inject drugs

If you can't give up, never use anyone else's needles or equipment.

Don't let anyone else use yours.

SHOULD I TAKE THE TEST?

Only you can make that decision. Allow yourself plenty of time to think carefully about the consequences. Knowing that you have the virus can fundamentally affect your life. Here are some ideas to think about.

- Knowing that you do not have the virus may put your mind at ease and stop you worrying unduly about AIDS.
- If you do have the virus and then develop symptoms of AIDS related disease your doctors may be able to start treatment earlier, which may benefit you.
- You may find it easier to practice safer sex if you know that you have the virus (but you should be doing this anyway).
- If your partner has the virus your results may help you decide how to carry on your sex life.

On the other hand:

- No major life assurance company will give life assurance to someone who has the virus.
- All life assurance companies ask searching questions if you have taken the test, even if the result was negative, and some may not give you life assurance.
- Your housing and employment may be put at risk if it is known that you have the virus and it could adversely affect your chance of getting a new mortgage.
- Some people with the virus have been rejected by their families and friends, and have been left to cope alone.

It may help you to write down a list of all the reasons why you are considering the test. Put it away somewhere private for a few days, then look at it again and ask yourself if you still feel the same.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) which can damage the body's defence system so that it cannot fight infection. HIV is not easily transmitted – you cannot become infected through everyday social contact.

HIV is transmitted in three main ways:

- Through penetrative sexual intercourse
- By injecting drug users sharing syringes and needles
- From an infected mother to her unborn child

In the past, a number of people were infected through infected blood or blood products. This may still occur in some areas of the world but is extremely unlikely in most developed countries, including the UK, where all blood has been screened since October 1985.

People who have been infected with the virus do not all have AIDS. In fact most of them are still healthy and do not know they are infected. From what we know about the condition at present, we think that between a quarter and a third of these people will develop AIDS in about five to seven years time. Others may have less severe illnesses due to the virus and some will remain well for long periods.

BEFORE YOU DECIDE

Before you make any decisions, here are some questions which may help you.

- Am I likely to be infected?
- If I know that I do not have the virus, will that stop me worrying?
- To whom, if anybody, should I tell my result? (my partner? doctor? family?)
- When I get my result, whatever it is, how should I change my sexual behaviour?
- What if my partner and I are planning to have a baby? A pregnant woman may pass on the virus to her child.
- How would the result affect my housing or employment situation?
- Do I need the result to help me make decisions?

Take your time before you decide about a test.

If you want to talk about the test, or any other aspects of AIDS with a trained and experienced advisor, you can call:

National AIDS Helpline

0800 567 123

Calls are free and the phonedlines are open 24 hours, 7 days a week.

If you think you want the test make sure you talk with a Health Advisor at an STD clinic who can tell you about the test and its implications in more detail.

