

The HIV (AIDS) test and your pregnancy : your questions answered / St. Mary's Hospital Maternity Department.

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Publication/Creation

[between 1990 and 1995?]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/u94ea4q2>

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The HIV (AIDS) test

and

your pregnancy



**Your
questions answered**



Many women who are booked to have their baby in our hospital ask us about the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) test.

We do not routinely test women for HIV during pregnancy but will do so if you request it.

This leaflet might help to answer some of your questions about HIV.

Please take the time to read it through and if there is anything you don't understand talk to your midwife or doctor.

What is the HIV test?

First of all it's not a test for AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) but a test to detect infection with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), that may ultimately lead to the disease called AIDS. The test is performed on a sample of blood, like several others that you will have in preparation for the birth of your baby.


If you are infected with HIV, the test will show HIV antibody, which forms within three months of having been infected with the virus, although for some people it takes longer. People can carry the virus for up to ten years before developing the disease AIDS – and a small number may never develop AIDS at all.

How could I become infected?

It is important to say that the vast majority of women will not be infected. The virus is passed from one person to another through blood, semen or vaginal fluid. The commonest ways of becoming infected are by having sex with someone who has the virus or, if you use drugs, by sharing a needle with an infected person. This is what we call a 'risky contact'.

I don't take drugs – why should I be concerned?

If you have had sex with someone in the past who was infected with HIV you could be infected too, without feeling ill.



Or if your partner has had sex in the past year with another man, or with a woman in a country where HIV infection is more common, there is a chance that you could be infected.

If I have the test and it is positive what does it mean?

It means that you have been infected by the virus and that although you feel perfectly well, you can pass it on to your sexual partner or your unborn baby.

It does not mean you will develop AIDS – although a substantial number of people do within ten years, so a positive test means you could eventually become ill with the disease.

What about my baby?

At the moment we believe that about one in three or one in four (25 to 30 percent) of babies whose mothers have HIV infection will get the virus from their mother before or around the time of birth. Some of these babies will develop AIDS and may die within the first year of life, while others may go on to develop it later.

What if the test is negative?

If the test was done at least three months after the last 'risky contact' it almost certainly means you are not infected.


Should every woman have the test?

We don't believe so. But it is a decision that only you can make. If you feel that you may have had a contact in the past that could put you at risk we advise you to discuss it with us, if only to put your mind at ease.

What are the advantages of having the test?

If you know you are definitely at risk it may help you to know whether you are infected. If the test is **positive**, you can then decide whether or not to continue with your pregnancy. The choice is entirely yours.

If you decide to go ahead with the pregnancy, you will want your newborn baby to be checked regularly by a doctor so that any



signs of infection or illness can be found early. If HIV infection is confirmed, appropriate treatment can be offered at an early stage.

If the test is **negative** you will be reassured about your own health and that of your baby.

What are the disadvantages of having the test?

If you have a positive test you will not get life insurance, and if your employer finds out you have had a positive result it could also affect your job prospects.

What about my partner?

You are bound to think about how a positive test will affect your personal relationship and will probably want to discuss the issue with him before making your mind up. Because there is still a great deal of prejudice against people with HIV infection and AIDS you should consider very carefully who else you tell both about planning to have the test and about the result. These decisions will rest with you.

In any case we do not carry out the test in our hospital without careful discussion and counselling beforehand. So there is no need for you to feel you are alone.

Can I find out more?

Please don't hesitate to discuss this issue if you wish at your visit to the antenatal clinic. All our doctors and midwives will be only too pleased to give you advice and practical help.

There is also a booklet – **Women and AIDS**, published by the Terrence Higgins Trust – available at the antenatal clinic.

Do remember that whether you decide to have the test or not, and whatever the result, it makes no difference whatsoever to the care we offer you throughout your pregnancy.