

Testing : your rights in a world which has HIV / Immunity Publications Ltd.

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TESTING
YOUR
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IN A
WORLD
WHICH HAS
HIV

immunity

What's the HIV test?

Your body produces antibodies to protect you from HIV – but they can't kill the virus – and the usual HIV test analyses a sample of your blood for those antibodies.

How reliable is the HIV test?

Testing for antibodies to HIV can be unreliable because your body takes about three months from the moment you get infected to develop them.

So a test done within three months of getting infected won't find any antibodies in your blood and your test may be negative – but a few weeks later it might be positive.

If you get a positive HIV test result, the clinic will probably test your blood again using another method.

What's the point of testing?

People's attitudes to testing vary.

Some say it's a good idea to be tested – even though there's no way of killing the virus in you, if you're found to be HIV positive – because if you find you're infected with HIV, you can start taking drugs, like AZT, which slow down the spread of the virus inside you.

They say that if you learn you're HIV positive, you'll know you should start eating and living more healthily – which might mean you won't get ill.

Others object to the test because of the effects a positive result can have on you. They say you should only have the test if you start getting illnesses which often people who are HIV positive get.

One reason for having the test is that doctors need to know how many people

are HIV positive, to get an idea of how widespread HIV infection is.

But just having the test whatever the result can cause practical problems, like when you want to get life assurance or an endowment mortgage.

Is testing ever compulsory?

Not in the UK. But sometimes you may not be able to avoid being tested for HIV.

Most often people are tested because they ask for it – usually at a hospital's genitourinary clinic. But some blood taken in hospitals for other tests is also tested for HIV as part of a government programme of mass 'unlinked anonymous testing'.

That programme concentrates on people who are inpatients at general hospitals, pregnant women, women who are having their pregnancies terminated, new-born infants, people who inject drugs and people who attend hospital genitourinary clinics – sometimes called 'special' clinics or "GU' or 'STD' clinics.

If your blood is tested as part of this programme, no-one, not even you, should ever find out the test's result.

Under the programme's rules, the only details that should be kept are your age, sex, sexual orientation and details of what sort of risks of infection you have run. Your name should not be kept – so the result shouldn't be linked to you.

The programme is meant to monitor the spread of HIV. If a hospital tests your blood under the programme, it won't ask for your consent.

Is my consent needed for a test?

At present that's the subject of debate and conflicting opinions.

The British Medical Association's lawyers have said you must consent to your blood being taken if you're to know the result. At Immunity we agree.

What does 'consent' mean?

Consent means you must agree – and that you must know what you're agreeing to. That's what lawyers call 'informed consent'.

We don't think it's enough for you to have agreed to give a blood sample. You must know what the sample is needed for because being HIV positive can have serious results. Before you give the blood you must be told about the virus and what a positive result could mean.

What if I refuse an HIV test?

It depends on why the test's done. No hospital should make you have a test.

Surgeons carrying out an operation, for instance, can't insist on testing you, simply to see what risks they run.

They should behave as if everyone they operate on were HIV positive.

But, if you take out life assurance or a mortgage and you're asked to have a test, refusing will probably mean the insurance company or lender turns down your application. You can choose: either agree to the test or shop around.

What if I'm tested without my consent?

If anyone tests you after you've refused your consent to an HIV test, you could

have them prosecuted for assault – and sue them for damages.

If you're tested without your knowledge, we think the person who carries out that test is just as liable to court action as anyone who tests you when you've refused to consent to a test. As yet the law on that hasn't been decided by the outcome of a court case.

But you have the fundamental right to say what happens to your body.

Who will know the result of your HIV test?

Generally, the result of your test shouldn't be passed on to anyone else, without your consent. Your GP and your hospital owe you a duty of confidentiality.

If you're tested as part of the government's mass testing programme, no-one should know whose blood was tested.

If you ask for a test at a hospital STD clinic, the staff there have an absolute duty of confidentiality but, to avoid the spread of the virus, information can be passed to other doctors treating you.

If your GP takes your blood for an HIV test, he/she does not have as complete a duty of confidentiality to you – and may decide that it's for the public good to tell your family or your partner that you're HIV positive, even if you object.

A doctor who examines you for insurance purposes should not give details to the insurance company unless you agree – but you'll usually have signed a form agreeing to everything being disclosed before the doctor examines you.

What happens in medicals for job applications?

Employers often ask you to take a medical when you're offered a job. If you refuse, you may lose the job.

"Pre-employment HIV/AIDS screening as part of assessment of fitness to work is unnecessary and should not be required", according to a 1988 joint statement from the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation.

You can ask your GP for a copy of any medical report he/she supplies for employment or insurance purposes. That right doesn't extend to an insurance company's or an employer's own doctor.

Are people who want to enter the UK — or who want to stay here — tested?

The UK "has no intention of emulating those countries which have introduced compulsory screening for immigrants or other groups. Quite apart from the grave problems of principle...it would be of little value in controlling the spread of AIDS", that's the official line.

But people who want to stay here for more than six months will be sent for a medical examination. There's no sign that will include an HIV test.

People from countries which have no reciprocal health-care arrangements with the UK — most that have those arrangements are in Europe and the Commonwealth — may be refused entry if they seem to be coming to the UK for free medical treatment.

LONDON AND NATIONAL GROUPS AND SERVICES

Afro Caribbean Helpline Service: Advice, info. Free ☎ 0800 567 123. Fr 6-10pm

ACET (AIDS Care, Education & Training): Christian group gives practical help with home care and some grants. ☎ PO Box 1323, London W5 5TF. ☎ 081-840 7879 Mo-Fr:9am-7

ACT-UP: ☎ BM Box 2995. ☎ 071-490 5749. Meets: Lesbian & Gay Centre, 69 Cowcross St, London EC1 Tu: 7pm

AIDS Ahead: HIV education for people with hearing difficulties. ☎ c/o Facts Centre, between 23 & 25 Weston Park, London N8 9SY. ☎ 081-348 9195

Asian AIDS Helpline: Advice in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, English. ☎ 0800-282 445. Calls free. We 6-10pm

BHAN (Black HIV & AIDS Network): Advice, support for black people with HIV. ☎ 111 Devonport Road, London W12 4PB. ☎ 081-741 9565

BODY POSITIVE: Mutual help, support group. **BP London Centre:** ☎ 51B Philbeach Gardens, London SW5 9EB. Mo, Fr 11am-9, Tu-Th 11am-5. For other BP groups ☎ 0532-374928 & 071-370 2051 or National AIDS Helpline ☎ 0800 567 123.

Body Positive Helpline: ☎ 071-373 9124 Daily: 7-10pm. **Body Positive Support Group:** People who have just found they are HIV positive, people anxious about HIV & lovers, close friends & relatives of people in both groups meet: Lesbian & Gay Centre, ☎ 69 Cowcross St, London EC1. Su: 12.15pm.

CARA (Care & Resources for People Affected by AIDS/HIV): Support, training for Christians & others. ☎ 178 Lancaster Rd, London W11 1QU. ☎ 071-792 8299

Cantonese AIDS Helpline: Advice. ☎ 0800-282 445. Free Tu 6-10pm

Haemophilia Society: Info, advice, support for people with haemophilia, HIV positive through Factor 8 use. ☎ 123 Westminster Bridge Rd, London SE1 7HR. ☎ 071-928 2020

Immunity: Specialist legal centre for anyone with legal problems connected with HIV infection or AIDS. Free advice, representation, wills, welfare rights advice. Appointment necessary. Sessions at Body Positive Centre, Landmark, London Lighthouse. ☎ 260A Kilburn Lane, London W10 4BA. ☎ 081-968 8909 Mo-Fr 10am-5

The Landmark: Meals, recreation facilities, advice for HIV-positive people and people who have AIDS. ☎ 47a Tulse Hill, London SW2. ☎ 081-671 7611/2 Mo & Th 10am-9, Tu & Fr 10-5pm, We 10am-7

LAGER (Lesbian & Gay

Employment Rights): Rights at work experts. Mostly men. ☎ St Margarets House, 21 Old Ford Rd, London E2 9PL. ☎ 081-983 0696. Mo-Fr: 1-5pm

Lesbian Employment Rights: ☎ Rights at work experts. Women only ☎ as LAGER. ☎ 081-983 0694 Mo-Th: 7-10pm

London Lesbian Line: Information, support, advice for women. ☎ 071-251 6911 Tu-Th: 7-10pm

London Lighthouse: Counselling, health advice, home support, carers; breaks, terminal care, advice sessions. ☎ 111 Lancaster Rd, London W11 1QT. ☎ 071-792 1200

Mildmay Mission Hospital: Christian-run. Convalescence, respite, & terminal, day & home care for City & East London. Mother & baby rooms. Frontline office. ☎ Hackney Rd, London E2 7NA. ☎ 071-729 2331

National AIDS Helplines: Free. ☎ 0800-567 123 for advice. ☎ 0800-555 777, for leaflets on HIV. 24 hours

Positively Sober: HIV-positive potential members of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. ☎ Body Positive Centre, 51b Philbeach Gdns, London SW5. ☎ Paul on 071-485 2047

Positively Women: Advice, support for & by women affected by HIV. ☎ 5 Sebastian St, London EC1V 0HE. ☎ 071-490 5515

PACE (Project for Advice, Counselling and Education): Counselling & counselling training. Meetings at & ☎ London Lesbian & Gay Centre, 69 Cowcross St, London EC1. ☎ 071-251 2689

SHARE (Shakti HIV/AIDS Response): Support, information, advice for & by people of south Asian origin. Hindi, Urdu, Singhalese, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil spoken. ☎ BM Box 3167, London WC1N 3XX

South East Asian HIV/AIDS Support Group: Meets at London Lighthouse. ☎ Hong Tan on 071-485 6756

SCODA (Standing Conference on Drug Abuse): Keeps list of syringe exchanges. ☎ 1-4 Hatton Place, London EC1N 8RU. ☎ 071-430 2341/3

Terrence Higgins Trust: Information, counselling on HIV. Support, services for HIV-positive people & people who have AIDS. ☎ 52-54 Grays Inn Rd, London WC1N 8JU. ☎ 071-831 0330 (admin only). Helpline: ☎ 071-242 1010 Daily:3-10pm

Women's Health & Reproductive Rights Information Centre: Advice on women's health issues, including HIV. ☎ 52 Featherstone St, London WC1Y 8RT. ☎ 071-251 6332 Mo, We, Fr, 11am-5

KEY TO SYMBOLS: ☎ = ADDRESS ☎ = PHONE

What's HIV?

HIV, short for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, was first discovered in 1983.

You can get infected with HIV by allowing the blood, semen or vaginal fluids of someone who's infected with the virus to get into your bloodstream.

HIV lives inside blood cells which are part of your body's defence system.

What's AIDS?

AIDS is short for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. If you have AIDS your body's defence system is weakened against all sorts of infections – so much so that you can catch diseases which can be shrugged off by people with healthy immune systems. And when you catch them, these diseases can turn out to be much more serious than they are in people whose immune systems aren't affected.

Nobody knows for certain, but it looks as if most people who have AIDS die of one of the diseases they catch, such as a rare form of pneumonia or a rare skin cancer.

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