

Patient information from BMJ

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HIV: testing

An HIV test tells you if you have the HIV virus. Being tested can be worrying, but modern treatments have dramatically improved the outlook for people who test positive.

If you think you have been exposed to HIV for any reason, see your doctor and get tested as soon as possible. If you test positive, early treatment leads to the best possible outcomes.

What is HIV testing?

HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. If you are infected by the HIV virus it damages your immune system. This makes it harder to fight off some types of infection, and easier for some cancers to develop.

Without treatment, HIV infection can lead to AIDS. AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**.

HIV spreads in several ways. The most common ones are:

- through sexual contact
- infection from mother to baby in the womb or during birth
- during breastfeeding, and
- sharing infected needles and syringes when abusing 'street' drugs.

An HIV test is simply a blood test that can tell if you have been infected with the HIV virus. Testing can also tell how severe the infection is: this means how much the virus has multiplied inside the cells in your body.

Who needs an HIV test?

Some people have an HIV test routinely in certain situations. For example, in most countries, all **pregnant women** have an HIV test.

And you might have to have an HIV test if you:

- apply for certain types of life insurance
- apply for certain jobs: for example, as a healthcare worker

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- visit your doctor and he or she can't tell straight away what is making you ill
- have symptoms similar to those of HIV
- have a health condition that is often linked to HIV, such as hepatitis
- give blood.

Some people ask to have an HIV test. This is usually because they think they might have been exposed to the HIV virus.

The main things that can expose you to the HIV virus are:

- sharing needles when injecting illegal drugs
- having multiple sexual partners, or changing sexual partners often, and not using condoms when you have sex
- being a man who has sex with other men
- having sexual partners who have HIV.

If you ask your doctor for a test because you think you might have been exposed to HIV, he or she will ask you about any symptoms you have been having.

Some of the **symptoms of HIV** infection can feel a bit like a bout of flu that doesn't go away. Symptoms that suggest HIV can include:

- fevers and night sweats
- tiredness
- feeling generally unwell
- sore throats and swollen glands in the throat
- weight loss
- skin rashes
- a fungal infection called candidiasis (thrush) in the mouth
- mouth ulcers
- diarrhoea
- headaches and muscle pain.

Before you are tested your doctor should talk to you about what will happen, however the test turns out.

For example, for a **positive test**, your doctor should talk to you about treatment, how to keep yourself and your loved ones healthy, and how to talk to your loved ones about HIV.

For a **negative test**, your doctor should discuss with you how to protect yourself from HIV in the future. This might include things like using condoms during sex, and safe needle use if you inject drugs.

As well as HIV, you should also be tested for health problems that often go alongside HIV, such as:

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- hepatitis
- sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and
- tuberculosis.

You might also be tested for diabetes, and have tests to see how well your liver is working.

In many countries, people being tested for HIV have two tests. This is because the main HIV test, called the **ELISA test**, is not always totally accurate.

So a second, different test, called the **Western blot test** is used to get a result that's as accurate as possible.

If you test positive for HIV your doctor should examine you to check on the level of your general health. This helps your doctor to understand what treatment you need.

So your doctor might check:

- your height and weight
- the glands in your neck and other areas, for any swelling
- your skin, for any signs of rash, fungal infections, or other skin problems
- inside your mouth, for thrush (candidiasis, a type of fungal infection), and other mouth problems that can suggest HIV
- your heart and breath sounds, for signs of heart or lung problems
- whether you have any swelling in your abdomen
- your genitals, for signs of STDs, and
- your eyes.

Your doctor might also ask about your **mental health**. People dealing with mental-health problems sometimes struggle to look after themselves physically.

Talking to a doctor or healthcare worker about how to deal with HIV and mental-health issues can help you to keep you safer and healthier.

Some myths and wrong ideas about HIV testing still persist. For example, many years ago, having an HIV test could affect people's ability to get life insurance, or might make it more expensive.

But with modern treatments, and HIV testing being so common now, things like this should no longer be a problem anywhere.

What will happen?

If you have an HIV test because you think you might have been exposed to the HIV virus, it's possible that your lifestyle means that you could be exposed to it again.

So, even if your test is negative, you and your doctor should **make a plan** to reduce your chance of being exposed to the virus in future. This could involve things like using condoms for safer sex, or using needles safely if you inject drugs.

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If your test is positive, your doctor will want you to start treatment as soon as possible.

The main treatment for HIV infection is **antiretroviral treatment (ART)**. It works very well, and most people who take it live for many years in fairly good health. But for it to work you need to take it exactly as prescribed.

If you need to take ART, your doctor will explain exactly how you need to take your medication. For more information on ART, see our leaflet *HIV: antiretroviral treatment (ART)*.

If you are upset or distressed by a positive test result, or if you are worried about telling your loved ones, your doctor might be able to arrange for you to have counselling to help you.

Many organisations and support groups offer help and information to people with HIV and AIDS. For example, in the UK, the Terrence Higgins Trust (tth.org.uk) has been providing these services for many years.

Your doctor might be able to help you find support in your area, or you can easily search online.

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