



HIV and HIV Tests

What are HIV and AIDS?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) causes an infection that damages the immune system. The immune system is the part of the body that fights infection and disease.

Over time HIV infection may lead to a serious disease called Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

How can I get HIV?

HIV passes from one person to another by:

- having vaginal, anal or oral sex without using a condom
- having a different sexually transmitted infection (STI) like syphilis, chlamydia or gonorrhea, which makes it easier to become infected with HIV
- sharing used needles or other drug-using equipment
- blood-to-blood contact such as blood transfusions in countries where the donated blood is not tested
- sharing used tattoo equipment
- a mother who has HIV infection passing it to her baby during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding
- sharing razors or toothbrushes, if there are open sores – this is rare

What are the symptoms of HIV?

Many people with HIV do not have any symptoms and do not know that they have HIV. Some people will have a severe flu-like illness soon after being infected.

The only way to know that you have HIV is to have an HIV test.

What is an HIV test?

When someone becomes infected with HIV, his or her body makes certain proteins called antibodies. The HIV test looks for these antibodies. If antibodies are found during testing the result is positive for HIV infection.

Most people who have an HIV infection will develop antibodies 4 to 6 weeks after being infected with the virus. Almost all people who have an HIV infection will develop HIV antibodies that can be found on an HIV test after three months.

What are the types of HIV tests?

There are two types of HIV tests available. One of these is a standard HIV antibody test done using a blood sample taken from your arm. The result is available in 1-2 weeks.

The second type of HIV test is called a point-of-care test using a drop of blood taken from your finger. The result is available at the time of testing. When a point-of-care test result indicates that HIV antibodies may be present, a standard HIV antibody test is required to confirm HIV infection.

Why test for HIV?

Having an HIV test and knowing your test result will help you to make decisions about your health.

It is your choice to have an HIV test. Talk to your health care provider before having the test if you have any concerns or questions about the HIV test or your HIV test result.

What about HIV test results?

If your HIV blood test is negative and it has been more than 3 months since you may have been exposed to HIV, then it means that you likely do not have HIV. If it has been less than 3 months since you may have been exposed you may still have the virus, but the test cannot detect the antibodies. You will need to have a second test after the 3 months have passed to be sure.

What if my HIV test is positive?

If your HIV test is positive it means that you have an HIV infection. Your health care provider will talk with you about the supports and treatments available. Although HIV is a life-long infection and there is no cure, there are medications available to help people with HIV.

You can still live a full and good life if you have an HIV infection; getting early and ongoing health care is important.

Who has access to HIV test results?

In B.C., positive HIV test results are shared with public health to ensure that you and your partners are offered support and follow-up. At the time of having an HIV test, you may choose whether to use your full name or a combination of your initials and birth date as your identifying information.

In B.C., laboratory test results are kept in a provincial laboratory system called the Provincial Laboratory Information Solution (PLIS). The results of your HIV test may also be found in your electronic health record within your health authority. Health care providers who are providing you with care will be able to see portions of your health care record. How much a health care provider can see of your record depends on their role and health care providers who are not providing you with care will not be able to access your record.

What about my partners?

If you have an HIV infection, it is important to tell your sex partner(s) and people who have shared your needles or other drug-using equipment so that they can make decisions about their health and getting tested.

If your HIV test is positive your local public health nurse can help you to notify partners in a confidential way.

How can I prevent HIV infection?

- always use condoms for any vaginal, anal, and oral sex
- talk with your sex partner(s) about getting tested for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections
- use new needles and drug-injecting equipment every time you inject
- use only properly sterilized equipment for tattooing
- if you are sharing sex toys use a new condom for each person

If you believe that you have been infected with or exposed to HIV within the past 72 hours, you may go to your local emergency room for advice about whether to take medications to prevent developing HIV infection.

Ways to reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection

- The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.
- To help protect yourself and your partner(s) from an STI, use a condom during any vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- Latex and polyurethane male and female condoms help prevent the spread of many sexually transmitted infections including HIV.
- A new condom must be used each time you have sex.
- If a condom breaks, a pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection may occur. If a condom breaks during sex and you are concerned, talk to your health care provider.
- Use only water-based lubricants with male latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants such as petroleum jelly, lotion or baby oil, can weaken and destroy latex.
- Store latex condoms at room temperature (not too hot and not too cold) and check the expiry date on the condom package.
- Spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9) may increase the risk of infection/transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and is not recommended to prevent HIV or these infections.

For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#08o Condoms Help Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).



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