

HIV
TESTING:
WHAT
YOU
NEED TO
KNOW

A RESOURCE FOR WOMEN

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that weakens the *immune system* (your body's built-in defense system against disease that allows you to stay healthy).

HIV can be transmitted through acts such as:

- **vaginal or anal sex without a condom**
- **sharing equipment to inject or inhale drugs**
- **using unclean needles for tattooing and piercing**

HIV can be transmitted from a positive mother to her baby during **pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding**; with treatment and support, the risks of transmission from mother to child can be reduced to under 1%.

When a person first becomes infected with HIV, they may develop flu-like symptoms but these pass, and are not often taken as signs of HIV infection. A person who is living with HIV can feel and look healthy for many years, without developing any symptoms, or only experiencing minor medical problems like yeast infections, rashes or colds.

The only way to know if you are infected with HIV is to be tested.

Only 5 body fluids can contain enough HIV for the virus to be transmitted: blood, semen (including pre-cum), rectal fluid, vaginal fluid and breast milk.

WHAT IS AN HIV TEST?

An HIV test uses a small sample of blood to see if it contains any *HIV antibodies* (proteins that are produced by the blood to help fight infection).

An HIV test result can be:

- **Negative:** there are no HIV antibodies in your blood, so you are not infected with HIV
- **Positive:** there are HIV antibodies in your blood, so you are infected with HIV
- **Indeterminate:** in rare cases, the result of the test may be unclear or come out as a 'false positive.' This does not mean that you are HIV positive, but you will need to do another test.

HIV antibodies usually develop within 6-8 weeks, but it can take up to 3 months for your body to produce enough antibodies to give an accurate test result. This is called the *window period*. If you test negative before the window period is over, you should get another test 3-6 months after the time of possible infection, to be sure.

Newer tests have been developed that test for the HIV virus, or that combine testing for the virus and testing for antibodies. The window period can be as short as 1 month with these tests. Ask your tester about the test they use.

WHY SHOULD I GET AN HIV TEST?

If you've had **unprotected sex**, you've shared drug equipment, you've received a blood transfusion outside of Canada, or you've been diagnosed with or have symptoms of an *STI* (a Sexually Transmitted Infection), you are at risk for HIV infection. The only way to be sure is to get tested.

Deciding to receive an HIV test can be scary, but it also offers a lot of benefits:

- The earlier you find out if you are HIV positive, **the longer and healthier you can live** by accessing support, treatment and learning how to take care of yourself
- The counselling process that accompanies the HIV test can allow you to **receive information** on how to protect yourself and others from becoming infected
- If you are HIV positive and you are or you want to become pregnant, you can access care and support to **have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby**
- You can **put your mind at ease**, talk to someone and learn **more** about HIV

You may want to discuss HIV testing with your partner, and encourage him/her to be tested too. Your tester or local AIDS organization can help you find ways to bring up and discuss HIV with your partner.

WHAT TYPES OF HIV TESTING ARE AVAILABLE IN CANADA?

Different types of HIV testing are available in Canada. Access to these different types of testing **depends on the province or territory where you live**. It can also vary within a same province or territory.

- **The Standard Test:** This test uses a small sample of blood, taken from a vein in your arm. The blood sample is sent for testing in a laboratory. It usually takes between 1 to 3 weeks before you get your result back.
- **The Rapid Test:** This test is available in some sexual health, HIV or specialized clinics and emergency rooms in certain provinces. It uses a drop of blood from your finger and gives a result in a few minutes. If the test is *reactive*, this means you're probably infected with HIV, but a standard test will be done to confirm the result.

WHAT TYPES OF HIV TESTING ARE AVAILABLE IN CANADA?

The types of testing below can use a **Standard or Rapid Test**. What changes is how the test is tracked and reported.

- **Anonymous Test**: You are given a code, so you don't have to give your name or present an ID or health card. You and your tester are the only ones to know you have been tested and what the result is, though your tester doesn't know your real name. If your test is positive, when you begin receiving treatment and care for HIV, this information will be recorded in your medical chart and your result will no longer be anonymous. You can get free anonymous testing at some sexual health and specialized clinics.

- **Nominal Test**: You give your name and your provincial health card. This information is linked to your blood test. Your test result is recorded in your medical chart. If your test is positive, the public health office will ask you to contact your recent sexual and/or drug-use partners, to let them know that they may have been exposed to HIV (this is called *partner notification*). If you don't feel comfortable contacting your partners, the public health office can do this for you. They will not use your name when speaking to your partners. Nominal tests are done at your doctor's office, walk-in clinics and hospitals.

WHAT TYPES OF HIV TESTING ARE AVAILABLE IN CANADA?

- **Non-nominal Test:** This test is similar to the nominal test, except your test is ordered using a code or your initials, so only you and your doctor or tester will know your result. If you are positive, your result will be recorded in your medical chart and the public health office will contact you to talk about partner notification.
- **Prenatal Test:** Canada's provinces and territories have different policies around prenatal testing, but HIV testing should always be offered to a woman when she is pregnant. If you are pregnant and have HIV, there are different things you can do to stay healthy and prevent your baby from being infected (you can find more information in the resources listed on the last page).

Before being tested, you may want to think about the possible risks and benefits of each type of testing. Speak to your tester or a local AIDS organization about the types of testing that are available in your area, and which option is best for you.

In Canada, HIV testing is not automatically anonymous. To be tested anonymously, you need to find a site that offers anonymous testing. Your local AIDS organization or public health office will be able to tell you if, and where, you can access anonymous testing in your area.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT DURING AN HIV TEST?

Once you have decided where you want to get tested, you should call to make an appointment. Some clinics offer drop-in hours, so you may be able to show up without making an appointment, though it's always recommended to call ahead to double-check.

• Pre-Test Counselling:

When you go in for your test, many clinics will give you a chance to speak to a tester (for example a nurse or a counsellor) in private. This is called *pre-test counselling* and it is an important part of the testing process. The tester will ask you why you want to take the test, when and how you think you may have been exposed to HIV and questions about your health and your sex life. They will also talk to you about how HIV is transmitted and give you advice on safer sex or drug use. **You may feel shy, but the tester is not there to judge you. In fact, the more information you give, the better he or she will be able to help you.** You can also take this opportunity to ask questions and talk about your fears and concerns.

If you are tested with a rapid test, the pre-test test counselling, the test, the results and the post-test counselling all take place in one session.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT DURING AN HIV TEST?

• Testing:

After the pre-test counselling process, the tester will use a needle to take a sample of blood from a vein in your arm, which will be sent for analysis in a laboratory. You will be asked to return for your result within 1, 2 or 3 weeks. The time spent waiting for your result can be emotional and stressful. **Talking to someone you trust, reading about HIV or contacting a local AIDS organization can help make you feel more relaxed.**

If you are doing a rapid HIV test, the tester will take a drop of blood from your finger and tell you your result after a few minutes. If you have a positive test result using the rapid test, the tester will then take a sample of blood from your arm, which will be sent to the laboratory for a standard blood test to confirm the result. You will need to return 1 to 3 weeks later to receive the confirmatory result.

You may want to bring a friend or someone you trust with you when you go for an HIV test. Some AIDS organizations have volunteers or staff members that can accompany you for support.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT DURING AN HIV TEST?

- Post-Test Counselling:

Results for HIV are never given over the phone so you will need to get your result in person. The tester will take you to a private room and give you your result. This should be accompanied by another counselling session, called *post-test counselling*. If your test result is negative, the tester will talk to you about ways to stay safe, like using condoms during sex or using clean equipment if you use drugs. If your test result is positive, the tester will talk to you about HIV and the different options that are available to you so you can stay healthy and well.

Pre- and post-test counselling are very important. It is your right to receive counselling when you receive an HIV test. However, it sometimes happens that pre- and post-test counselling are skipped over. If you need more information about HIV or support to help you deal with your diagnosis, contact your local AIDS organization.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST NEGATIVE?

Testing negative doesn't mean that you are immune to HIV; you can still become infected if you practice acts that put you at risk, like unprotected vaginal or anal sex or sharing drug equipment. Learning more about HIV and how to protect yourself can help you stay healthy and safe.

It is illegal for an employer or a landlord to ask you to be tested for HIV. Some insurance companies may ask that you be tested for HIV before you can get coverage. The Canadian immigration process requires that adults be tested for HIV. Testing positive doesn't mean that you will be denied entry into Canada.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST POSITIVE?

Testing positive for HIV can be overwhelming. **It's important to remember that you are going to be okay.** Being HIV positive doesn't mean that you are going to become very sick, but you may have to make some changes in your life, like taking medications that can have strong side effects, and looking after yourself by eating well, sleeping more and reducing or quitting smoking and drug use, if you can.

You will also need a lot of support, so you may want to talk to your good friends or family. There are still a lot of myths and misunderstandings about HIV and AIDS in Canada, so **make sure that you are opening up to people that you trust.** Your local AIDS organization or online resources can help you determine when, how and to whom to *disclose your status* (tell them you have HIV).

YOU ARE NOT ALONE! There are thousands of women living with HIV in Canada and millions in the world. Lots of organizations and clinics in Canada offer excellent services and support to people who are living with HIV.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST POSITIVE?

Your local AIDS organization can help you access the information, support and care that you need.

Speaking to other women who are HIV positive can be useful for emotional support, and to get ideas on how to stay healthy, on being an HIV positive partner or mother, on managing the disease, and other concerns or questions you may have.

In Canada, you can be criminally charged if you have sex with someone without telling them you are HIV positive. Your local AIDS organization will be able to give you some advice and additional information so you can continue to enjoy a healthy and active sex life.

If you are afraid of experiencing violence if you receive an HIV test or test positive for HIV, you may be able to access specialized services through your AIDS organization or the women's organizations and shelters in your area.

You will not lose your children if you are HIV positive. Many HIV positive women in Canada are living happy, healthy lives with their children and their families.

WHERE CAN I GET AN HIV TEST?

Anonymous HIV tests are available at HIV testing centers, sexual and reproductive health clinics and other specialized organizations and health clinics. These tests are usually free.

You can get a nominal or non-nominal HIV test from your doctor, at a walk-in clinic or in a hospital. These tests are not anonymous, and your result will be linked to your name. If you receive a test from your doctor or a clinic, the test is usually free. You may have to pay if you are receiving a test at a hospital.

If you are uncomfortable talking to your doctor about HIV, contact an AIDS organization or the public health office in your area. They can help you find the testing option that is best for you.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HIV AND HIV TESTING?

You can learn more about HIV by contacting or visiting an AIDS organization, a sexual health clinic or other medical clinic in your area. You can also call these toll-free hotlines:

Alberta: 1-800-772-2437

British Columbia: 1-800-661-4337

Eastern Arctic: 1-800-661-0795

Manitoba: 1-800-782-2437

Newfoundland and Labrador: 1-800-563-1575

New Brunswick: 1-800-561-4009

Northwest Territories: 1-800-661-0844

Nunavut: 1-800-661-0795

Nova Scotia: 1-800-566-2437

Ontario: 1-800-668-2437

Prince Edward Island: 1-800-314-2437

Quebec: 1-888-855-7432 (For women: 1-866-240-0090)

Saskatchewan: 1-800-667-6876

Yukon: 1-800-661-0408, x 8323

CATIE hotline: 1-800-263-1638

You can also find a lot of useful information online, at these addresses:

- Canadian AIDS Society: www.cdnaids.ca
- CATIE: www.catie.ca
- Canadian Women's Health Network: www.cwhn.ca
- To find an AIDS organization in your area: www.aso411.com
- Legal information about HIV in Canada: www.aidslaw.ca
- A resource for women over 40: youshouldknow.ca
- Information about testing from the Public Health Agency of Canada:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/aids-sida/info/4-eng.php
- The Positive Women's Network (in BC): www.pwn.bc.ca
- Healthy pregnancies, and HIV positive motherhood: www.motherisk.org

The Canadian AIDS Society would like to thank all of the individuals and organizations who participated in the development of this document, including the community reviewers who provided input and feedback.

This resource was developed in the context of a research project entitled 'Women and HIV Testing in Canada: Barriers and Facilitators.' For information about this project, or to obtain additional copies of this or other resources, please contact the Canadian AIDS Society.

Ce document est également disponible en français.

The production of this resource has been made possible through a financial contribution from:

Gap Inc.

and



The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Gap Inc. and ViiV Healthcare.



190 O'Connor, Suite 100
Ottawa, ON, K2P 2R3
Telephone: 1-613-230-3580
Toll Free: 1-800-499-1986
www.cdnaids.ca

© 2011, Canadian AIDS Society