

PRENATAL  
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**
- **receiving a blood transfusion** (in Canada, blood supplies are tested rigorously; this is more of a concern if you have received a transfusion outside of Canada)

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 either:

- **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 to 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.

# WHAT IS A PRENATAL HIV TEST?

**A prenatal HIV test is an HIV test that is done when a woman is pregnant, to determine if she is HIV positive. If she is HIV positive, she can receive treatment and support to allow her to stay healthy and to prevent her baby from becoming infected.**

# WHY SHOULD I RECEIVE A PRENATAL HIV TEST?

The HIV virus can be transmitted from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, during birth and through breastfeeding.

Getting an HIV test early in your pregnancy will give you information so you can make decisions about your health and your baby's health, and make sure that you both stay healthy. **The earlier you find out if you are HIV positive, the longer and healthier you can live** by accessing support and treatment and learning how to take care of yourself and your baby.

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.

# IF I AM PREGNANT, WILL I AUTOMATICALLY BE TESTED FOR HIV?

It is important to get in touch with a clinic or a doctor as soon as you find out that you are pregnant, so you can receive *prenatal care* (care that will ensure that you and your baby stay healthy throughout and after your pregnancy).

**Receiving prenatal care does not guarantee that you will be tested for HIV.** In Canada, prenatal HIV testing falls under two models, depending on the province or the territory where you live:

- In the **OPT-IN** model, your doctor will ask you specifically whether you want to receive an HIV test and you must *consent* (say yes) before you are tested.
- In the **OPT-OUT** model, HIV testing is included as one of the many other tests you will receive during your pregnancy. Your health-care provider should still tell you that you are being tested for HIV, and ask you to *consent* for the test to be done.

# IF I AM PREGNANT, WILL I AUTOMATICALLY BE TESTED FOR HIV?

Whether you live in a province or territory that uses the “opt-in” or “opt-out” model, **a doctor should always:**

- **Tell you** that he or she is testing you for HIV
- Ask you to ***consent*** (say yes) before doing an HIV test
- **Give you information about HIV** and where to receive support if you test positive

In Canada, some women have been tested for HIV without knowing that they were being tested. This is wrong. Whether you are pregnant or not, **you always have the right:**

- **To know that you are being tested** for HIV
- **To refuse being tested** if you don't want to be
- **To ask for and be tested for HIV** if you want to be

Don't be shy to speak to your doctor about HIV and whether you have been or will be tested during your pregnancy. You can also contact a local AIDS organization or the hotlines listed on the last page to find out more about HIV and pregnancy.

# WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST HIV 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.



# WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST POSITIVE? THE EMOTIONAL SIDE

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.

Finding out that you are HIV positive when you are pregnant can be stressful, but it is also very important. **It can allow you and your doctor to take the necessary steps to stay healthy and ensure that your baby will not become infected with HIV.** You will not lose your baby or other children because you are HIV positive. In fact, finding out your HIV status can allow you to access support to be a happy and healthy parent.

**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?

## THE EMOTIONAL SIDE

If you test HIV positive, you will need support. You may want to talk to your good friends or family. **There are still a lot of misunderstandings about HIV 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).

**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.

# WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST POSITIVE? THE MEDICAL SIDE

Finding out that you are HIV positive when you are pregnant doesn't mean that you should *terminate your pregnancy* (have an abortion), unless this is what you want and choose to do. Other people may tell you what they think is best, but ultimately, **the decision is yours**. Take your time to learn more about HIV, the support options in your area, and what it means to be an HIV positive parent before you decide what to do. **Many HIV positive women in Canada are giving birth to healthy babies and living happily with their families.**

If you decide to have your baby, you and your doctor can discuss the various options to reduce your baby's risk of being infected with HIV. They are:

- **Antiretroviral drugs**: During pregnancy and labour, you can take a combination of HIV drugs that will reduce the chances that your baby will become infected. During your pregnancy, you should receive regular blood tests to track the virus and the effects of the medication. Once you go into labour, you can receive medication to prevent your baby from being infected. This treatment is usually free.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I TEST POSITIVE? THE MEDICAL SIDE

- **Vaginal or Caesarian birth:** Depending on how much virus is in your blood, your doctor may recommend a vaginal birth or a *caesarian section* (a surgery where the baby is delivered through a cut in your lower belly).
- **Avoiding breastfeeding:** Because breast milk contains HIV, your baby can become infected through breastfeeding. **Your baby should be given infant formula as a safe alternative to breast milk.** In Canada, you can receive assistance from your province or territory or from local organizations to help you cover the costs of formula. Contact the hotlines on the last page to find out more information about formula assistance programs in your area.

For many women, there is a cultural or social pressure to breastfeed. If you are HIV positive and choose not to breastfeed, you may be asked questions about why you are not breastfeeding. Plan ahead by preparing answers to these questions. If you'd like support around how to do this, contact your local AIDS organization or hotline.

# WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BABY IF I TEST HIV POSITIVE?

Once your baby is born, **he or she will have to take medicine for at least six weeks.** This treatment is usually free. You can receive information from your doctor, your local AIDS organization and other mothers who are living with HIV as to what possible side effects may be, how to give your baby the medicine, and any other questions you may have.

After birth, your baby will receive three blood tests to find out if the virus has been passed on. The first will be given a few days after birth, the second at 1 month and the last at 2 to 4 months.

**With proper care and support, the chances that your baby will become infected are very low (less than 1%).**

Finding out your baby has been infected with HIV can be very difficult, but it doesn't mean that you are a bad parent or that your baby is going to die. Currently, there are medicines and other forms of support that can allow children, women and men who are HIV positive to live long and healthy lives.

# WHAT IF I REFUSE TO RECEIVE TREATMENT DURING MY PREGNANCY?

Under Canadian law, as a mother, **you have the right to make decisions about your health and your baby's health as long as the baby is still in your womb.** This includes the right to accept or refuse an HIV test, and to accept or refuse to take anti-retrovirals during your pregnancy. **Once your baby is born, you do not have the same rights over your baby's health.** It's important for you to know that if you refuse to treat your baby with an anti-HIV drug, the authorities may intervene and bring you to court. If they believe that your baby's health is in serious danger, your baby may be taken away from you.

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

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

Motherisk HIV hotline: 1-888-246-5840  
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.cdn aids.ca](http://www.cdn aids.ca)
- CATIE: [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)
- Canadian Women's Health Network: [www.cwhn.ca](http://www.cwhn.ca)
- To find an AIDS organization in your area: [www.aso411.com](http://www.aso411.com)
- Legal information about HIV in Canada: [www.aidslaw.ca](http://www.aidslaw.ca)
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada: [www.sogc.org](http://www.sogc.org)
- Information about testing from the Public Health Agency of Canada:  
[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/aids-sida/info/4-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/aids-sida/info/4-eng.php)
- The Positive Women's Network (in BC): [www.pwn.bc.ca](http://www.pwn.bc.ca)
- Healthy pregnancies and positive motherhood: [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org)

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