



# SHARP FACTS

## Testing for HIV



### What is HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. A positive HIV test result does not mean that a person has AIDS, but does mean a person may develop AIDS. HIV is passed from one person to another through blood-to-blood and sexual contact. In addition, an infected pregnant woman can pass HIV to her baby during pregnancy or delivery, as well as through breast-feeding.

### How can I tell if I'm infected with HIV?

The only way to know for sure if you are infected is to be tested for HIV infection. You cannot rely on symptoms to know whether or not you are infected with HIV. Many people who are infected with HIV do not have any symptoms at all for many years. Similarly, you cannot tell that a person has HIV or AIDS simply by looking at them.

### Will an HIV test protect from getting HIV?

No. The HIV test does not protect you in any way. It only tells you if you have been infected with HIV.

### Where can I get tested for HIV infection?

All active duty Sailors and Marines are tested for HIV at least every 2 years. Family members and certain civilian employees can request testing through their military healthcare provider. Other places offering testing include local health departments, hospitals, and sites specifically set up to provide HIV testing. The SHARP internet website <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp/index.htm> includes links (under "My Personal Health") to help you locate a military medical treatment facility or a free civilian source of HIV testing near you.

**Never** donate blood just to be tested for HIV.

Rapid testing is offered at many locations. A rapid test takes 30 minutes or less. Some testing sites may offer oral fluid rapid testing (no blood is needed). In comparison, results from the commonly used HIV antibody screening test, the enzyme immunoassay (EIA), takes about 1-2 weeks. Both the rapid tests and the EIA look for the presence of antibodies to HIV. As is true for all screening tests (including the EIA), a reactive rapid HIV test result must be confirmed before a final diagnosis of infection can be given.

It is important to seek testing at a place that also provides counseling about HIV and AIDS. Counselors can answer any questions you might have about risky behavior and ways you can protect yourself and others in the future. In addition, they can help you understand the meaning of the test result and describe what AIDS-related resources are available in the local area.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National AIDS Hotline can answer questions about testing and can refer you to testing sites in your area. The Hotline numbers are 1-800-342-2437 (English), 1-800-344-7432 (Spanish), or 1-800-243-7889 (TTY).

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Consumer-controlled test kits (popularly known as "**home test kits**") were first licensed in 1997. Although home HIV tests are sometimes advertised through the Internet, currently only the *Home Access* test is approved by the Food and Drug Administration. (The accuracy of home test kits other than Home Access cannot be verified.) The Home Access test kit can be found at most local drug stores, or may be ordered by mail. The testing procedure involves pricking your finger with a special device, placing drops of blood on a specially treated card, then mailing the card to a laboratory. Customers are given an identification number to use when phoning for the test results. Callers may speak to a counselor before taking the test, while waiting for the test result, and when getting the result.

### **How long after a possible exposure should I wait to get tested for HIV?**

The tests commonly used to detect HIV infection actually look for antibodies produced by your body to fight HIV. Most people will develop detectable antibodies within 3 months after infection, the average being 25 days. In rare cases, it can take up to 6 months. For this reason, the CDC currently recommends testing 6 months after the last possible exposure (unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex or sharing needles). It would be extremely rare to take longer than 6 months to develop detectable antibodies. It is important, during the 6 months between exposure and the test, to protect yourself and others from further possible exposures to HIV.

### **If I test HIV negative, does that mean that my partner is HIV negative also?**

No. Your HIV test result reveals only your HIV status. Your negative test result does not tell you whether your partner has HIV. HIV is not necessarily transmitted every time there is an exposure. Testing should never take the place of protecting yourself from HIV infection. If your behavior is putting you at risk for exposure to HIV, it is important to reduce your risks.

### **What if I test positive for HIV?**

If you test positive for HIV, the sooner you take steps to protect your health, the better. Early medical treatment and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay well. Prompt medical care may delay the onset of AIDS and prevent some life-threatening conditions.

### **Why should all pregnant women be tested for HIV?**

There are medicines to lower the chance of an HIV-infected pregnant woman passing HIV to her infant. HIV testing and counseling provides an opportunity for infected women to find out if they are infected and to get medical care that may help to keep her healthy.

### **Where can I get more information?**

Speak with your doctor right away if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. CDC provides information through their National AIDS Hotline at (800) 342-AIDS (2437). For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP) Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

This information was adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Navy Environmental Health Center, from material developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).