

## HIV Testing

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. When a person is infected with HIV, their body produces antibodies (special proteins) to fight the infection. The HIV antibody test is a blood test that looks for these antibodies. The test can only tell if a person is infected. It cannot tell when they were infected or if they will develop AIDS. Most people begin to make antibodies within 2-8 weeks after they are infected, but some people may take longer. This means that the HIV antibody test may come back negative even after a person has been infected with HIV. Some laboratories are using newer HIV tests that can detect HIV before antibodies have developed. Therefore, the type of HIV test you have will affect the interpretation of your test results and when you should undergo repeat testing.

### Why is it important to be tested?

North Carolina no longer allows anonymous HIV testing. Your test results will become part of your confidential medical record. Your health care provider will use this information to offer you appropriate counseling and to make recommendations for your medical care.

HIV testing is especially important for all pregnant women. Medications are available that will significantly reduce the risk of a mother passing HIV to her unborn child. The earlier HIV-specific medication is started the less likely HIV will be transmitted to your baby. The State of North Carolina requires all pregnant women to be tested at least once during pregnancy, but a second test in the later part of pregnancy or at Labor & Delivery may also be necessary. If you are planning to have children, consider being tested for HIV before becoming pregnant.

### What does a positive test result mean?

A positive test result means that your body has produced antibodies as a result of being infected with HIV. If you are infected with HIV, you can pass the virus on to others even if you look and feel well. Testing positive for HIV antibodies does **NOT** mean that you have AIDS. However, you have a high probability of developing AIDS in the future, especially if you do not seek medical care and do not take HIV specific medications.

### What should I do if I test positive?

If you test positive, your test result will be reported to the local and state health department. A counselor may meet with you and explain your positive test. They will also inquire about any potential sexual and needle sharing partners about their possible exposure to HIV. When the counselor talks with your partners, information about you, such as your name, will be kept strictly confidential. If you are married and test positive for HIV, your spouse will be notified and counseled, either by your physician or by the health department.

It is also important for you to inform your health care providers of your positive test results, as well as to make a physician appointment as soon as possible. There are tests that can be done to tell if HIV has begun to damage your immune system (your body's ability to fight off other infections). Previously HIV specific medications were not started until your immune system was already damaged. We now know that the sooner you are started on HIV medications the stronger your immune system will be and the less likely you are to transmit HIV to your sexual partner(s). People infected with HIV also have a better chance of living longer when they are treated early. Also, you should have a TB (Tuberculosis) test and be checked for other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Untreated illnesses can cause serious health problems.

North Carolina law requires people who test positive to take the following steps to prevent the spread of HIV.

**DO:**

- Tell persons you have had sex and/or shared needles within the past year about your infection. If you know when you became infected, then all partners since the date of infection must be told.
- Tell new sex partners about your HIV infection before engaging in sexual activity. Failing to tell new sexual partners could lead to infection of others.

**DO NOT:**

- Have sex unless latex condoms are used.
- Share needles or syringes (works).
- Give or sell blood, plasma, platelets, other blood products, semen, ova, tissues, organs, or breast milk

**What does a negative test result mean?**

A negative test result means that antibodies have not been found in your blood. There are two possible reasons for this:

1. You have not been infected with the virus; OR
2. You have been infected with the virus but have not yet produced antibodies.

It is important to keep in mind that a negative test result DOES NOT mean that you have not been infected with HIV. It also does not mean that you will not be infected with HIV in the future.

**How can I protect myself against HIV?**

- Avoid drug use. If you are using drugs, seek help from a drug treatment program
- Needles should never be shared.
- Do not have sex. If you are sexually active, it is safest to have only one partner and make sure you are the only person your partner is having sex with. The more partners you have (or your partners have) the greater the chance that you or your partner will come into contact with someone who is infected.
- Sexually active people should always use:
  - Male or female latex condoms to prevent blood, semen, and vaginal fluids from getting into your body
  - latex condoms with water based lubricant during vaginal and anal sex
  - non-lubricated latex condoms or a dental dam during oral sex
  - water-based lubricants during sex (oil-based and petroleum-based-- Vaseline jelly-- lubricants can weaken latex and cause the condom to break).
  - a spermicidal lubricant to provide added protection

*Approved by NC Women's Hospital Patient Education Steering Committee, January 2010,  
Interim revision December, 2010, May 2014*