

HIV And The HIV Test

AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is a disease that cripples an important part of the body's immune system, the T-4 helper cells. This leaves a person vulnerable to certain types of cancers and to a wide variety of serious infections that are usually not found in people with a healthy immune system. A person must have at least one of these "opportunistic" diseases to be diagnosed as having AIDS. At present there is not effective vaccine against, or cure for AIDS or the virus that causes AIDS.

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) causes AIDS. Approximately 20-30% of the people infected with HIV will develop serious opportunistic infections or cancers (AIDS) within five years of infection. Although most of the people with HIV infection do not have opportunistic diseases, they can still transmit the virus to others. An estimated 25-45% of the people with the virus have AIDS Related Complex (ARC). This is characterized by a weakened immune system that can cause many symptoms including chronic fatigue, diarrhea, swollen glands, weight loss, night sweats and other nonspecific conditions. The remaining majority of people with the virus are healthy and often are not aware that they have an infectious virus.

The HIV Antibody Test—Limitations And Implications

A. This test will not tell you:

- if you have AIDS or ARC
- if you will develop AIDS or ARC
- If you are healthy

B. A negative HIV test result indicates that the antibody has not been found in your blood.

There are two possible explanations:

- you have not been infected with the virus, or
- you have been infected with the virus, but have not yet produced antibodies.

Research indicates that most people produce antibodies within 2-8 weeks after infection. Some people will not produce antibodies for up to 6 months.

C. A positive test result indicates that you have probably been infected with the virus that causes AIDS, and your body has produced antibodies. Research has shown that most people with HIV antibodies have active virus in their bodies and are contagious and capable of passing the virus on to others. A positive test does **NOT** mean:

- that you have AIDS or ARC
- that you will necessarily get AIDS or ARC

D. Everyone infected with the virus may develop AIDS. Thus far:

1. The majority of infected people will develop antibodies to the virus, and yet remain healthy. They have, as yet, displayed none of the symptoms of AIDS.
2. A smaller group (24-45%) of people who also have antibodies have developed some of the symptoms of AIDS, but none of the opportunistic diseases. These people are diagnosed as having AIDS-related-complex(ARC).
3. Approximately 20-30% of infected people will develop AIDS within 5 years after infection. A diagnosis of AIDS is made only after finding specific, life-threatening infections or malignancies that do not normally occur in healthy people.



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Confidentiality

You should be aware that there is some risk associated with letting others know about your test results. It is advised that you keep this information very private. Every effort is made to insure the confidentiality of your test results. Any information that may identify you is kept in your medical records, and is available only to a limited number of people who have a "need to know." These people are your physician or practitioner and his or her nurses. Florida law prohibits the release of HIV antibody test information without your written consent. The law also forbids the use of the test result as grounds for discrimination in insurance or employment.

Who Should Be Tested For HIV?

The HIV antibody test should be considered by anyone who may be infected by the virus that causes AIDS. The virus is transmitted in the following ways:

1. **Through intimate sexual contact:** The virus has been found in semen, vaginal secretions, and menstrual blood, and can be transmitted from one sex partner to another during sexual activity. People who have had sex with a homosexual/bisexual male, intravenous drug abuser, prostitute, someone emigrating from Haiti or Central Africa since 1977, multiple sex partners, or an HIV infected person, have increased risk for acquiring the virus.
2. **Sharing needles:** The virus is found in blood. Transfer of contaminated blood from one person to another as occurs through the sharing of needles and syringes by IV drug abusers may cause infection. Blood used for transfusion in surgery after April 1985 has been tested for the antibody and is considered free from HIV contamination. Hemophiliacs and other people who received blood or a blood product before April 1985 may be at increased risk for having acquired the virus.
3. **Perinatally:** A mother who has the virus can transfer HIV to her newborn either before, during or after birth (breastfeeding). **It is very important that health care providers know if a mother and/or her newborn is infected so that appropriate medical care can be provided.**

The virus that causes AIDS is not transmitted through the air or by casual contact. If you think you may have been exposed through any of the above activities, please contact our office or your county Public Health Unit.



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Benefits And Risks Associated With The Test

Benefits

A negative test most likely means that you have not been infected with the HIV virus. If you **follow the safe practices outlined below and test negative for six months**, then it is almost certain that you have not been infected.

1. Use a condom (rubber) when having sex with a new partner or anyone who may be infected.
2. **Practice Safe Sex.** Ask your doctor or nurse to explain more about safe sex.
3. Do not use illegal drugs or share needles or syringes.

The benefit of knowing you are **HIV-negative** is that you probably will not infect others and that you can protect yourself from being infected by sexual or needle-sharing contacts with others. The benefit of knowing you are **HIV-positive** is that you can keep from infecting others, including unborn children. You can also take steps to care for your health, and possibly reduce your chances of developing AIDS.

Risks

A **negative HIV** test result may lead some people to have a “false sense of security.” They may think that they can continue unsafe behaviors and will never be infected. This is not true! To remain uninfected, safe behavior must be substituted for unsafe sexual practice and IV drug use.

A **positive HIV** test result may cause personal anxiety because of uncertainty about the outcome of the infection and because there is no cure for AIDS at present. However, if you test positive and do not know about it, it may be more difficult for you to make the changes necessary to prevent the spread of this disease to others.