

HIV PRETEST INFORMATION

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. This virus attacks the body's immune system, lowering its ability to fight disease.

How does a person become infected with HIV?

To get HIV, you must come in contact with the body fluids of a person who has HIV. The virus is found in blood, semen, vaginal/anal fluids and breast milk. One of these fluids must enter the body through a mucous membrane or a break in the skin. (Mucous membranes are moist areas that lead into and out of the body such as the vagina, urethra, rectum, mouth, eyes and nose.) HIV cannot be passed through casual contact such as shaking hands or hugging or through sweat, saliva or tears.

HIV is spread by:

- vaginal sex (penis in vagina, vagina to vagina)
- anal sex (penis in rectum)
- oral sex (mouth on genitals) - any sores or cuts in the mouth or genitals increases the risk of transmission
- sharing equipment, needles and/or syringes for drugs/steroids
- sharing sex toys
- an infected mother to her unborn, newborn or breastfed baby
- non-sterile or used equipment for tattooing, electrolysis, ear/body piercing, acupuncture

There is also a risk of getting HIV if you received blood or blood products before November 1985 or received donated organs or semen before July 1987 when screening began in Canada.

Having a sexually transmitted infection (STI) like chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis or herpes can weaken your body's natural protection and increase your chance of becoming infected with HIV if you are exposed to the virus. Women with bacterial vaginosis (BV) may also be at an increased risk if exposed. Young women under 18 years of age are also at greater risk because the cells of the cervix are not fully developed. It is important to get tested regularly for STIs and to be screened for hepatitis A, B and C.

Testing

A blood test is done to find antibodies to HIV. It can take up to 12 weeks for these antibodies to develop in the body therefore testing may not be accurate until 12 weeks after exposure. This time is called the "window period".

At Peel Public Health Healthy Sexuality Clinics there are two ways to be tested for HIV. Both tests include counselling before and after the test. You can choose whichever test you prefer but you can choose only one. Both tests are $\geq 99.6\%$ accurate.

Testing can be done anonymously or using your full name. If you choose anonymous testing, your year of birth and an identification number are used on the lab requisition. Only clinic staff have access to these files. Testing can also be done at your family doctor's office but the test will not be anonymous.

1. Standard HIV antibody blood test

- Blood is taken from a vein in your arm and sent to the Ministry of Health laboratory.
- If the test is positive, the lab then does a second test to confirm the results.
- Results are sent back to the clinic in 1-2 weeks.
- You must return to the clinic to get your results. The results of the test are given in person only and not over the phone.
- Abstinence is necessary until the test results are known. It is important not to put anyone at risk.

2. Rapid HIV screen

- Blood is taken from the tip of a finger.
- This blood is then screened at the clinic using a special testing kit.
- Results are ready in a few minutes.

Test Results

Negative blood test or non-reactive screen

If it has been 12 weeks or more after your last risk exposure and your blood test is negative or rapid test is non-reactive, you do not have HIV and no further testing is needed at this time. If it has been less than 12 weeks, you should consider retesting. If you are involved in activities that put you at risk,

you may become infected with the virus at any time. Your partner(s) should be tested at the same time as you. You need to know if they were tested outside the window period and the result of their test.

Reactive screen

A reactive screen from the rapid test kit means you may be infected with HIV. Blood will be taken from a vein in your arm and sent to the lab for the second test that confirms the results. Results are sent back to the clinic in 1-2 weeks. You must return to the clinic to get your results.

Positive blood test

A positive test from standard blood testing means that you carry the virus, therefore you have HIV. It does not necessarily mean you have AIDS. No one knows when someone infected with the virus will develop AIDS. An early HIV diagnosis lets you get medical advice and early treatment.

It is very important to understand that you can pass HIV to others. If you have HIV, it is required by law (Supreme Court of Canada, 1998) that all present and future sexual and needle/equipment-sharing partners be told of your infection before any risk activities take place. All past partners and contacts will also need to be told that they may have been in contact with HIV so they can get tested. Public health staff will do this for you, protecting your identity, or can help you to do this. It is recommended you tell anyone such as health care professionals who may be exposed to your body fluids.

How to prevent getting HIV

It is very important to protect yourself and not put anyone at risk by exposing them to your blood and body fluids.

Keep yourself and others safer by:

- exploring alternatives to penetrative sex
- using lubricated condoms for vaginal sex
- using condoms with extra lubricant for anal sex
- using non-lubricated condoms for oral sex on a man
- using a latex barrier (called a dam) or a non-lubricated condom cut length-wise for oral sex on a woman, vagina to vagina sex or oral/anal sex.
- using new needles, syringes, drug equipment
- not sharing sex toys or use a new condom on sex toys
- not using enemas before anal sex
- not douching (females)
- getting tested for HIV before you enter a new relationship and talking to your partner about ways to keep each other safe
- getting tested for STIs as having other STIs increases the risk of HIV transmission
- talking to your partner about your sexual history

Male condoms should be made of latex (or polyurethane if allergic to latex) to help prevent STIs, HIV and hepatitis.

Healthy Sexuality Clinics have free condoms, dams and needle exchange programs.

For more information call Peel Public Health
905-799-7700
and ask for Sexual Health Information
or visit
intheknowpeel.ca peelsexualhealth.ca