

HIV Test

What is the HIV test?

The HIV test is done to see if you are infected with the virus that causes AIDS (autoimmune deficiency syndrome). AIDS is a life-threatening but preventable disease. Over time, HIV weakens your ability to fight off serious infections and some cancers. When this happens, HIV infection becomes AIDS.

When you are infected with HIV, your immune system makes antibodies to the virus. Antibodies are substances that try to destroy or get rid of the virus. Most tests for HIV check for these antibodies. If you have the antibodies, it means you have been infected with HIV.

Why is it done?

There is no way to know without testing if you are infected with HIV. Learning that you are HIV positive will allow you to get care for yourself, may make it possible for you to live for many years with good treatment, and will help prevent spread of the infection to others.

How do I prepare for the test?

Usually no preparation is needed. If you are using a home test kit, follow the instructions on the package.

It is important to get counseling before or when you have the HIV test. This can help you be aware of things you do that may increase your risk for HIV infection. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions about the test.

How is the test done?

Your first HIV test may be done:

- At your healthcare provider's office or a clinic. There are 2 types of tests:
 - A quick-result blood test that uses a small amount of blood taken from your finger or arm.
 - A mouth swab test that uses a sample of fluid taken by swabbing your gums and mouth.
- At your home, using a test kit that you can buy at most pharmacies or drug stores. Look for a test that is approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Other tests may not give you reliable results. Tests include:
 - A blood test that uses a small sample of blood from a prick of your finger. You mail the sample to a lab, where a healthcare professional will test the sample for HIV. In about a week, you can call a toll-free number to get your test results.
 - A mouth swab test, which shows your results in just a few minutes.

What does the test result mean?

- A **negative result** usually means that you are not infected with HIV. However, it takes at least a few weeks for HIV antibodies to show up in the blood after you have been infected by the virus. This means that if you have just recently been infected, your first test result might be negative. If you have a negative test result but you are at high risk for infection, you may need to have another test in 3 to 6 months.
- A **positive result** usually means that you are infected with HIV. Sometimes an HIV test result can be positive even though you do not have HIV infection. This is called a false positive test. If your first test is positive, you will need to have a second test to check the results. The second test takes longer and is more precise.

What if my test results are positive?

If your second test for HIV is positive, you should seek medical care, even if you don't have any symptoms. Talk to your healthcare provider about your result and ask questions such as:

- If you need more tests, which may include tests to monitor your health.
- What kind of treatment you might need
- What lifestyle or other changes you might need to make
- How often you should see your healthcare provider

When you test positive for HIV, the results are reported (without giving your name) to the local health department and your sexual partner(s). This will help your partner(s) get prompt testing and treatment for the infection. It can also help prevent new infections.

Developed by RelayHealth.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.