

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Testing

What is HIV?

HIV is a virus that damages the way the body protects itself against illness. If it is not treated, HIV may lead to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Early testing and treatment can prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

What is AIDS?

AIDS causes the body to lose its natural protection against infection. A person with AIDS is more likely to become ill from infections, unusual types of pneumonia and cancer than healthy persons.

How does someone get HIV?

HIV is found in the blood and body fluid (semen or vaginal secretions) of an infected person. The virus is spread from the infected person to others in the following ways:

- During sex—vaginal, anal or oral
- While sharing needles or devices used for injecting drugs or tattooing
- By passing the virus from an HIV-infected woman to her baby during pregnancy and birth, or by breastfeeding

How is HIV diagnosed?

A person with HIV may look and feel healthy. They may not know they have HIV and can infect others. Only an HIV test can tell if you have been exposed to the virus. If you are infected with HIV, your immune system makes proteins called antibodies. It takes most people up to 12 weeks after exposure before the antibodies can be detected. This is called the “window period.” In some cases, the window period may be as long as 6 months.

If your test is positive for HIV, it means you are infected and can infect others. If the test is negative, it usually means you are not infected. However, you should be tested again if you have engaged in behavior that could transmit the virus within the 6 months before the test.

An HIV antibody test can be done in 1 of 2 ways:

- Blood test
- Mouth swab

Some tests check for both the HIV antibody and the HIV antigen, which detects HIV infection earlier than the antibody tests alone.

Early testing, diagnosis and treatment can help in the following ways:

- Prolong life and keep people out of the hospital
- Prevent the spread of HIV to sexual partners

Who should be tested for HIV?

Anyone 13 to 64 years old should be tested for HIV as part of routine health care. If you are at risk for HIV, you should be tested at least once a year. Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk for HIV infection and a testing schedule that is best for you.

HIV testing during each pregnancy is very important. If your test is positive, early treatment can improve your health and lower the chance that you will pass HIV to your baby.

Where is testing done?

HIV testing can be done in the hospital or you can arrange to be tested by your own physician. Many local health departments and community agencies offer free, anonymous and confidential testing services. For help, call the Illinois Department of Public Health toll-free AIDS/HIV hotline at 800.243.2437.

How can HIV be prevented?

- Never share needles or injection equipment.
- Practice “safe sex” by using latex condoms correctly every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- Do not impair your judgment with drugs or alcohol.

How can I obtain more information about HIV?

Call the free and anonymous AIDS/HIV hotline at 800.243.2437 or TTY (text telephone for hearing impaired use only) 800.782.0423 to learn more about:

- Your risk
- HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) www.idph.state.il.us
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) www.cdc.gov/std/
CDC-INFO Hotline (24 hours, 7 days a week)

- 800.232.4636 (English and Spanish)
- 888.232.6348 (TTY)

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363 or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

Developed by: NMH HIV Center