

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Testing

HIV basics

HIV is a virus. It 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.

AIDS basics

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

How someone gets HIV

HIV is in the blood and bodily fluids (semen or vaginal secretions) of an infected person. The virus is spread from the infected person to others through:

- Vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- Sharing needles or devices used for injecting drugs or tattooing.
- Pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. An HIV-infected mother can pass the virus to her baby.

How HIV is diagnosed

A person with HIV may look and feel healthy. They may not know they have HIV. They may also not know that they can infect others. Only an HIV test can tell if you have 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 a test can detect antibodies. 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 likely means you are not infected. But, if you have engaged in behaviors that can transmit the virus within the 6 months before the test, you should get tested again.

There are 2 ways to test for HIV:

- Blood test
- Mouth swab

Some tests check for both the HIV antibody and the HIV antigen, (a substance that causes the body to make antibodies against it). These tests detect HIV sooner than antibody tests alone. Early testing, diagnosis and treatment can help:

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

People who should be tested for HIV

People 13 to 64 years old should be tested for HIV as part of routine health care. If you are at risk for HIV, get tested at least once a year. Talk to your healthcare team about your risk for HIV. They can recommend a testing schedule that is best for you.

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

Where to get tested

You can get tested for HIV in the hospital. Or, you can make plans to be tested by your 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 to prevent HIV

- Never share needles or injection equipment.
- Practice safe sex. Use latex condoms correctly each time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- Do not use drugs or alcohol. They can impair your judgment.

For more information

To learn more about HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and your risk, please contact:

- Northwestern Medicine's anonymous AIDS/HIV hotline. This service is available at no cost. Call 800.243.2437 (TTY: 711).
- Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). Visit idph.state.il.us.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Visit cdc.gov/std. Or, call CDC-INFO at 800.232.4636 (TTY: 888.232.6348) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to speak to someone in English or Spanish.