

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 severe illness, which is often known as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). HIV disease is the term that covers all of the condition's stages—from infection to the weakening of the immune system and the diseases that can happen from that. However, some people use the term AIDS to refer to the immune deficiency caused by HIV.

If you have any questions, please talk with your physician.

Early testing and treatment

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

AIDS basics

AIDS, often called advanced HIV disease, 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 their 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.”

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.
- › If you feel you are at risk for HIV, talk with your physician about medications to prevent HIV infection that healthy people can take. These are known as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medications.

For more information

To learn more about HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) 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 dph.illinois.gov.
- › Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Visit cdc.gov/sti. Or, call the CDC at 800.232.4636 (TTY: 711) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to speak to someone in English or Spanish.

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