

Testing and HIV

Early diagnosis of HIV is very important. Getting tested and diagnosed early not only improves the health outcomes for the individual but also means people are less likely to pass HIV on. In the UK over a quarter of people with HIV are undiagnosed, so encouraging people to get tested is very important.

Technology for testing HIV and knowledge about the signs of possible HIV infection have improved greatly over recent years.

Early signs

Over 70 per cent of people show symptoms of HIV in the first few weeks after infection. Normally flu-like or glandular fever-like symptoms, they can easily be missed, even by doctors. But three symptoms – a fever, a rash and a sore throat, all occurring together are actually unusual in an otherwise healthy person. If someone has put themselves at risk recently these symptoms are signs they should get an HIV test. The symptoms normally pass naturally within a few weeks. This stage of HIV is called ‘primary HIV infection’ or ‘sero-conversion illness.’ After this stage these symptoms disappear and there may be no further symptoms of infection for many years.

Types of test

The HIV test is not a test for HIV per se, but for HIV antigens or antibodies produced by the body in its response to HIV infection. It is not a test for AIDS.

The majority of HIV tests in the UK are in sexual health or antenatal clinics, but increasingly tests are being promoted in other hospital settings, in GP surgeries, in pharmacies and outside traditional healthcare settings.

In most sexual health clinics in the UK, a small blood sample is taken from a vein in the arm. Saliva can also be used for antibody tests. In the UK, once someone has tested positive for antibodies to HIV or for HIV antigens and they find themselves within the healthcare system, they should then have a test that directly measures levels of HIV, known as their ‘viral load’.

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Early tests

There is no longer a need to wait for a three-month 'window period' after possible exposure before testing for HIV. New tests – fourth generation assay tests – which are common in the UK can detect both antibodies and p24 antigens of HIV. As p24 antigens are produced before antibodies, these new tests can detect HIV one month after infection and provide a high degree of reassurance when the test result is negative. An additional test three months after possible exposure to HIV is offered to definitively exclude HIV infection. There is never a need to wait more than three months to receive a definitive result.

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Rapid tests

Rapid HIV tests are available in many clinics across the UK and allow people to take a test and receive the result in one visit. Fourth generation rapid tests are now available which can also reliably diagnose HIV one month after infection.

At home

Home sampling kits are also available to purchase in the UK. These require that a person take a blood or saliva sample in their own home. The individual then mails the sample to a laboratory and later receives their results via telephone or online. If the test produces a 'reactive result' – in other words, one which indicates the possibility of HIV infection – the person is strongly advised to seek a

confirmatory test in a clinic to diagnose HIV. Home sampling for HIV is legal in the UK.

Technology also exists for home testing kits, a rapid HIV test conducted by the person in their home giving results in minutes. These test kits are currently illegal in the UK.

Further information

National Guidelines for HIV Testing 2008

BHIVA – www.bhiva.org/HIVTesting2008.aspx

HIV Testing

NAM – www.aidsmap.com/cms1320696.aspx

Ante-natal HIV screening

www.avert.org/hiv-testing-pregnancy.htm