



## HIV INFORMATION

### HIV Testing

If an individual suspects that he/she may have been exposed to HIV, or if a person begins to exhibit symptoms of the virus, it is important for them to receive an HIV test. A key component to HIV testing is the pre and post-test counselling that provides information and support regarding HIV.

#### Pre-Test Counselling

Reasons for pre-test counselling include:

- Ensuring that the client understands the basic facts about HIV/AIDS
- Assisting the client in understanding the test and implications of the results
- Exploring what the client might do if the test is positive or negative
- Considering potential support network of loved ones, family, friends etc.
- Building understanding that if the client is HIV positive, there is medical care/monitoring which can help establish and stabilize long-term health
- Ensuring that the person has confidence in the confidentiality & privacy of test results
- Advisement on safer sexual practices
- Assessment of possible HIV infection risk
- Enabling the person to make an informed decision whether to take the test or not

#### **Some of the most important issues which you should explore and discuss BEFORE an HIV test is done:**

- Does the client understand the basic information about AIDS and HIV infection? Clarify any misinformation and misunderstandings.
- Does the client understand what the test is and what a positive or negative result would mean? Remind them that it is an antibody test and does not differentiate between HIV and the AIDS phase of the disease.
- Explore why he/she wants the test or explain why you have suggested the test. Discuss what benefits there are in knowing your HIV status. Establish the client's risk for acquiring HIV infection.
- It is also important to discuss how the client thinks he/she might react if the test is positive. How would he / she tell the news of the result to their sexual partner? If the result is positive, the sexual partner may also need a test.
- It is best if he / she thinks carefully about who to disclose the result to. Employers, friends, and even some family members may not keep the result private. It is important that the results are shared with confidence and trust.



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- Does the client know how to prevent the spread of HIV infection? Does he/she know how to have sex in a safe way? Can the client get condoms or do you need to provide them? Does he/she know how to use condoms correctly? You may need to explain in detail the importance of practicing safer sex from now onwards. Remember this may be the only time you will see the patient.
- Explain when and how he/she can get the result. HIV results should be given to patients in person and in private. The result must be kept confidential.
- Let the client know that you understand the difficulty and anxieties in having an HIV test. Let him/her know that you, or another health worker, will be available to give the result. Tell the client that it will be kept confidential and that ongoing support and advice is available if needed.

After exploring the above issues, it is important to finally ask if the client still wants to undergo the test, or would he/she like to think about it a little longer? This way the client will be able to give informed consent to have the test.

### Post-Test Counselling

#### Reasons for post-test counselling include:

- Helping a client to accept his/her HIV (if positive)
- Ensuring that the person understands the meaning of the result and can process the situation (if positive)
- Helping the person cope with the result, especially in the days and weeks to follow (if positive)
- Making a follow-up plan for ongoing care and support (if positive)
- Ensuring that the person is aware of the dangers of spreading HIV (if positive) or of preventing infection (if negative). Information on safer sexual practices should also be given.
- Establishing an understanding of the need for careful consideration and precautions for having children (if positive)
- Explaining the need for re-testing if the client is considered to be in the 'window' period (if negative)

#### Some of the most important factors to remember when giving the HIV test result:

- It is usually best to give the results as soon as possible without any unnecessary delay.
- Results must be given in a private and confidential manner.
- The client is likely to be very anxious and will be concerned about the result. Allow him/her time to think about it. Whether it is positive or negative, you must check that he/she understands the meaning of the result, and what the implications are. The client may need to return to clear up any misunderstandings or to hear some of the details again.

It is best for the client to make the final decision and choice to have the test or not.



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Remember to carefully counsel those whose HIV is negative, to avoid further risk of HIV infection.

### **If the HIV test result is positive:**

- Give the client time to express his/her feelings and fears, and encourage the client to talk. He/she may experience many different feelings including anger, guilt, sadness, anxiety, fear, confusion and disbelief. He/she may become emotionally 'shocked', or be unclear or confused about what to do next. These are all normal and expected responses. Give the client the opportunity to feel and express their emotions.
- Reassure the client that he/she will not be abandoned (left alone). Make it clear that the client will be supported and guided as to what to do next. Explain that coming to terms with the result is a process that takes some time.
- Try not to overload him/her with information and advice all at once. The client needs to understand that there is much that can be offered by health services to treat and support an HIV positive person. Let him/her know that you, or another co-worker, are available to provide ongoing support and care.
- The client should understand the importance of practising safer sex, and the need to protect sexual partners from infection. He/she may need to be given a supply of condoms.
- The client may need to be convinced that an HIV positive result does mean that there is definitely an HIV infection present in his/her body.
- For women, it is even more important for her to approach her sexual partner very carefully. The male partner may become aggressive and violent when he learns that his wife or girlfriend is HIV positive. He may go as far as to end the relationship. The woman needs to think very carefully about how to approach her specific situation.
- The client must also be aware that he/she must not donate blood for transfusion or share a syringe, needle or razor blade with anyone else.
- You will need to discuss to whom he / she should tell the result and when to do so. Also discuss the possibility that he / she may be rejected by the partner, family etc.
- You may need to make another time to discuss this and other questions and problems.

### **If the HIV test result is negative:**

- Verify that the client understands the meaning of a negative result.
- If you feel he/she has had a risk of exposure to infection in the 12 weeks before having the test then you will want to advise the client to have another test in 6-12 months' time. Remember there is a 'window' period when a person has been infected with HIV but the test is falsely negative.
- Discuss the importance of the client remaining HIV negative. This means knowing how he/she could become infected in the future and the necessary precautions to prevent future infection.
- You may need to counsel the client about safer sexual practices. He/she needs to appreciate the seriousness of the HIV infection and make a decision to practice sex in a safer way. It might be useful to explore why it has been difficult for him/her to practice safer sex. The client also needs to understand the connection between other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and AIDS, along with the importance of having STIs treated.

**Before the client leaves, schedule a future appointment to meet and discuss new feelings that may have arisen. The client may want to include a supportive friend or family member in this meeting. Use this time to plan a follow-up programme for long-term health management.**

