

Are You Positive You're Negative?

**[Myths] and [Truths]
About HIV Testing**

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MAKING AIDS HISTORY

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[myth] I don't need an HIV test. There's no way I could be infected.

[truth] What you don't know can hurt you... and those you care about.

Twenty percent of people in the U.S. who are HIV positive do not know it, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This represents nearly 250,000 people. Moreover, it is estimated that the majority of new HIV infections are passed on by people who don't know that they themselves are infected. Anyone who has had unprotected sex with someone who is HIV positive (or of unknown status), shared a needle (for piercings, tattoos, or drugs), or had other body fluid to blood contact is at risk for HIV infection...and for spreading the disease to others.

[myth] AIDS is over in America. It's only a problem in other countries.

[truth] Every day, 140 Americans become HIV positive.

The HIV epidemic continues to rage in the U.S. Approximately 50,000 Americans are newly infected every year— that's an average of about 140 new infections every single day. More than a million Americans are living with HIV/AIDS. What's more shocking is that, over 30 years into the epidemic, one-third of Americans harbor misconceptions about HIV transmission, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

[myth] I can tell if someone is HIV positive by looking at them.

[truth] People can be infected with HIV for more than 10 years without showing signs or symptoms.

Even if a partner looks healthy, it is important to know his or her HIV status.

[myth] I'm monogamous so I don't need to be tested.

[truth] Unless you are 100% sure that both you and your partner are HIV negative, monogamy is no guarantee.

Do you really know the intimate history of all your past partners? If you are HIV negative, being in a monogamous, long-term relationship with another HIV-negative person virtually eliminates the risk of contracting HIV. But unless you both get tested, there's no guarantee that either of you is HIV-free.

[myth] My annual checkup includes an HIV test, doesn't it?

[truth] Only if you ask for it.

Routine blood tests—or pap tests that are part of routine gynecological exams—do not automatically include a test for HIV. Asking for an “STD test” also will not include an HIV test unless you ask for it specifically and give consent. The CDC, amfAR, and other leading voices say they should. The CDC has issued guidelines recommending that HIV testing occur during all routine medical examinations, but not all states have implemented the new guidelines. Right now, your doctor has to ask if you would be willing to be tested for HIV.

Or you can take control and say you want it done. It's your life, your health. Go for it.

[myth] If my doctor wants me to take an HIV test, I have to.

[truth] Your doctor can't test you without your consent.

HIV tests can only be done with the consent or at the request of the patient. A few states require written consent; for most, verbal consent is sufficient (visit www.cdc.gov for the requirements in your state). Based on the new CDC guidelines, you would still be informed that your blood was being tested, but you would be able to refuse the test if you wanted to.

[myth] At my age, I don't need to worry about HIV.

[truth] HIV infection is on the rise among older Americans, too.

People over 50 are one of the fastest growing segments of the population with HIV infection, representing 17 percent of new cases according to the CDC. This has something to do with the “Viagra effect” and even more to do with a host of cultural factors and false assumptions about the sexual activity of older adults. Actual HIV infection rates among older Americans are hard to know as a result of routine misdiagnosis, under-reporting, and lack of testing. In other words, HIV testing is not just for the young.

[myth] I give blood,
so I've been tested for
HIV.

[truth] If you tested
positive, you may not
have been told.

Nearly all donated blood is tested for HIV. But not all donors who test positive are told. While it has become standard protocol for blood banks to test each and every donation for HIV, there is no legal mandate to automatically inform individual donors of positive results.

[myth] If I have surgery, of course they'll test my blood for HIV.

[truth] Not unless you ask for it.

HIV testing is still not a standard protocol for surgeries and other major medical procedures, whether scheduled or in emergency rooms.

[myth] Women giving birth are routinely given an HIV test.

[truth] No, they aren't.

Under current protocols, an HIV test is done only if requested or agreed to by the mother-to-be. Yet all expectant women should be tested as early in pregnancy as possible. According to the CDC, with proper medical treatment, the chance of an infected mother passing HIV to her baby during pregnancy and birth is less than one percent.

[myth] If I test negative, my worries are over.

[truth] If you're having unprotected sex with a partner who is HIV positive or whose status is unknown to you, you need to get tested regularly.

It can take a few weeks or even months for HIV antibodies to reach detectable levels. And every time there's even a slight chance you've risked exposure, you need another test.

[myth] If I get tested I have to wait weeks to get the results and I have to go back to the doctor to hear them.

[truth] You can get test results in less than half an hour in the privacy of your own home.

Today, you can buy a rapid oral HIV test over the counter at most pharmacies. You simply swab the inside of your mouth and it provides results in 20 to 40 minutes. If you do test positive, you should see your doctor and get a blood test to ensure the result is accurate. Also, many clinics around the country administer these rapid HIV tests free of charge and have professionals on hand to provide counseling and referrals to any health care services you may need.

[myth] I can't live with the results.

[truth] If you're positive, you can't live without knowing. And those you love need you to get tested today.

Living and living well with HIV requires that you work closely with a healthcare provider to monitor the effects the virus is having on your body. Many HIV-positive people with access to proper treatment and medical care have the same life expectancy as non-HIV-positive people. Plus, getting tested and on HIV medication as soon as possible after infection reduces the damage the virus can do to your immune system and helps ensure a long, healthy life. Getting on HIV treatment and controlling the virus also dramatically reduces the chances of passing HIV on to a partner.

Get tested. You need to know your status.

HIV TESTING RESOURCES

amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research
www.amfar.org

CDC National AIDS Hotline
1-800-CDC-INFO
1-800-232-4636

CDC database of testing sites
www.hivtest.org

Kaiser Family Foundation fact sheet:
HIV testing in the US
www.kff.org/hivaids/fact-sheet/hiv-testing-in-the-united-states

Kaiser Family Foundation survey report:
American public opinion on HIV testing
www.kff.org/hivaids/poll-finding/2012-survey-of-americans-on-hivaids

CDC revised recommendations for HIV testing:
www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5514a1.htm

AIDS.org: Guide to HIV testing
www.aids.org/info/testing.html

The Body:
HIV testing information, news, and research
www.thebody.com/index/testing.html

INFORMATION SOURCES

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Kaiser Family Foundation

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), roughly twenty percent of the almost 1.2 million Americans who are HIV positive do not know they are infected. This means that many are transmitting the virus to others without knowing it.

If there's even a slim chance that you may have been exposed to HIV, don't wait. Get tested. For more information on HIV and how it is transmitted, visit www.amfar.org.

[Prevention Is the Cure.]

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