



# sheet

# Women and HIV Testing

# 1

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# fact

You may consider having a test for HIV for a number of reasons including:

- If you suspect or know that you have been at risk of being infected with HIV. This includes if you have had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with someone and/or if you have shared drug injecting equipment.
- If you are aware your partner is, has, or could be, having unsafe sex with other people.
- If you are starting a new relationship and you would like yourself and your new sexual partner to be tested.
- If you are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant.

Since 1985 all donated blood in Australia has been screened for HIV. Prior to this time people with haemophilia and other people who had blood transfusions were at risk.

There are good reasons for you to consider having an HIV test.

- a) It gives you an opportunity to assess any behaviours which may have put you at risk eg sexual and/or drug taking behaviour
- b) Early diagnosis of the presence of HIV gives you greater treatment options. The new drug combinations are effective in inhibiting HIV in your body and the earlier this can be done the better.
- c) You are in a better position to take care of yourself, monitor your health and maintain your quality of life

So if you think you may have been exposed to HIV, it is a *good idea* to be tested.

### Counselling • Consent • Confidentiality

There are 3 basic principles to remember about having an HIV test:

1. **Counselling** - through pre test counselling you find out about the test, discuss what it means and why you think you should have it. The purpose of pre-test counselling is not to assume that you will have an HIV test, but to assess whether you think you need to have one. Be really honest with yourself about your behaviours, the behaviour of others and situations in which you may have been at risk. This assessment should be done by you and your doctor/nurse/counsellor together. Ask as many questions as you like, and make sure you ask for information about HIV to read so you can consider whether you want a test or not.

If you have an HIV test you will need to go back to the doctor or nurse to get your HIV test result in person. It is not given out over the phone. At the

time of getting your test result you should be given **post-test counselling**. This will include support and practical information (names of organisations which can offer support/information) as well as an opportunity to review safe behaviours. Regardless of the result, **post test counselling is a MUST**.

**You should never be tested for HIV without your full knowledge and consent.**

2. **Consent** - Consent means you understand what having the test involves, the implications of the result being positive, and you freely choose to have it.

The doctor or nurse is required by law to give you the full information about having an HIV test and obtain consent from you regarding the HIV test (or any other medical procedure, treatment or test). There are some important issues to consider if you decide to have a test eg. What could be the effect of a positive or negative test result on your life? You may want to have support and someone to talk to when considering an HIV test eg. family, friends or health care professional (doctor, nurse, social worker).

3. **Confidentiality** - Every stage of this process is confidential, from considering having a test to receiving the HIV test results. Of course *you* are free to talk with anyone about what you are doing, but health professionals are not allowed to give out this information to anyone without your permission. Talk about this with them if you are concerned.

In a hospital situation, only the health care workers, doctors, nurses and counsellors who are caring for you have the right to know if you are HIV positive.

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A series of fact sheets for women about HIV.

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- 5 Pregnancy
- 6 Parenting

Produced by  
Family Planning NSW  
Ph 9716 6099  
Fax 9716 6164  
and  
AIDS Council of NSW  
(ACON)  
Ph 9206 2000  
Fax 9206 2069



ACON

## What the test is

Antibodies are produced by the body in response to any infection or virus. If you are infected with HIV, specific HIV antibodies will be present in your blood. The test for HIV looks for signs of these HIV antibodies being present.

If you decide to have an HIV test, then the doctor or nurse will take a sample of blood and label it with the first two letters of your surname and first name, birth date and postal code. Neither your name nor address are put on the blood sample. Check with your doctor about the procedure she/he is using to label the blood sample as it may differ from one doctor or Sexual Health Clinic to another. This will be different if you have an HIV test in a hospital. It is likely that the blood sample will have your name on it.

The sample is sent to a laboratory to be tested and the results will be returned to the doctor or nurse within 10 days.

Phone the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) on (02) 9206 2000 for their free booklet, *HIV Tests and Treatments*.

## Results

If your result is negative this means either you do not have HIV or that you have been infected but the HIV antibodies are not yet in high enough numbers to be detected by the HIV test. This is known as the 'window period' and can last up to about 3 months. You may need to have a second test in 3 months time to confirm the original test result. Talk with your doctor about this. Being HIV negative is also referred to as antibody negative and seronegative.

A negative result is an opportunity for you to consider the behaviours or situations which led you to have an HIV test. *A negative result doesn't protect you from HIV.* Review the behaviours which create any HIV risk for you. If you want to have sex with someone and you are unsure of their present and past sexual practices and/or injecting drug use, then use condoms or safe sex dams every time you have sex including oral sex, use a new fit every time - don't share needles or other injecting equipment - **look after yourself.** Ask the health care worker to show you how to use a condom or a dam if you are unsure.

If your result is positive this means you have come in contact with HIV and become infected with the virus. A positive test result is also referred to as antibody positive and seropositive. *An HIV positive test result doesn't mean you have AIDS.*

You will need further tests to determine the state of your immune system to assess the damage, if any, caused by the virus. It is important at this stage to establish a good relationship with a doctor you trust, who listens to you and in whom you have

confidence, in treating HIV. Many HIV positive women also find a complementary therapist to help them maintain their health and well being.

## If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy

If you are pregnant you will have a series of routine tests done at an antenatal clinic or by your GP to check for a number of things eg. german measles, etc. Unlike these tests, the HIV test is *not a routine test* although some doctors test women without their knowledge or consent. If you are unsure, ask your doctor what tests she/he is conducting, ask questions if you don't understand why something is being done or what it means. If you are considering pregnancy you may want to have an HIV test if you think you may have been at risk.

For more information about pregnancy issues for HIV positive women read the Pregnancy Fact Sheet available in this series.

## Who is allowed to request you to have an HIV test ?

Laws in Australia require people who want to become permanent residents, to have an HIV test and to provide the Department of Immigration with their results. This is a legal requirement.

Insurance companies are allowed to request you to have an HIV test and to supply them with the results. They may require a negative HIV result before they insure you.

Sometimes certain professions eg. dentists, surgeons, doctors, will ask if you have had an HIV test or request you have one and supply them with the results. This is *not* legally required and you can refuse. If you are refused any service eg. dental or medical care because you *are* HIV positive or *assumed* to be HIV positive, it is discrimination and is against the law.

If you are refused any service because you did not agree to have an HIV test you can contact the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission or the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board for information and legal advice about your particular situation.

### Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission

Ph (02) 9284 9600, or  
toll free 1 800 021 199  
TTY: 1 800 620 241

### NSW Anti-Discrimination Board

Ph (02) 9318 5400  
toll free 1800 670 812.

For more information about these issues read the Treatments and Newly Diagnosed Facts Sheets available in this series.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.