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HCFA Information  
Resource Center

# What About AIDS Testing?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, talks about what an AIDS virus antibody test can mean to you.



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**AMERICA  
RESPONDS  
TO AIDS**



An Important Message from the U.S. Public Health Service  
Centers for Disease Control



**A**IDS is a disease caused by a virus that can destroy the body's ability to fight off illness. The AIDS virus by itself doesn't usually kill. But it makes you unable to fight other diseases that invade your body. These diseases can kill you.

There are very few ways you can be infected by the AIDS virus. It is transmitted through semen, vaginal secretions, and blood. Therefore, it is possible that you can become infected by engaging in risky behavior, such as having sex — anal, oral, or vaginal — with an infected person, or by using drugs and sharing a needle and syringe.

Also, babies of women who have been infected with the AIDS virus may be born with the infection because it can be transmitted through the mother to the baby before or during birth.

People with hemophilia and others have been infected by receiving blood, especially during the period before 1985 when the virus was discovered and careful screening of blood donors began. It is impossible, however, and always has been, to be infected by the AIDS virus by giving blood at a blood bank in the United States.

Condoms are the best means now available for preventing sexual transmission for those who do not practice abstinence and have not formed a mutually faithful, monogamous relationship. But condoms are not foolproof. They must be used correctly and every time you have sex.

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## Do You Have The AIDS Virus?

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**I**f you have engaged in risky behavior, the only way to tell if you have the AIDS virus is by being tested.

The Public Health Service recommends you should be counseled and tested if, since 1978, you have had any sexually transmitted disease or have shared needles for injecting drugs; if you are a man who has had sex with another man; or if you have had sex with a prostitute, male or female. You should also be tested if you have had sex with anyone who you know has done any of these things.

If you are a woman who has been engaging in risky behavior and you plan to have a baby or are not using birth control, you should be tested.

Your doctor may advise you to be tested if you have received a blood transfusion between 1978 and 1985.

If you have been diagnosed with TB, your doctor may also advise you to be tested for the AIDS virus.

If you test positive, and find you have been infected with the AIDS virus, you must take steps to protect your partner.

More important, even though your test may be negative, you may still be infected with the AIDS virus and should take precautions not to transmit it to your partner.

People who have always practiced safe behavior do not need to be tested.

There's been a great deal in the press about problems with the test. It is very reliable if it is done by a good laboratory and results are interpreted by a physician or counselor.

If you have engaged in risky behavior, speak frankly to a doctor who understands the AIDS problem, or to an AIDS counselor.

There are two types of AIDS tests that you might be given, depending on the situation.

The *ELISA test* is the AIDS antibody test you usually hear about. ELISA, also called EIA, stands for Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay. It is the one used when you donate blood. It is also the first test used at clinics, hospitals, and counseling and testing centers.

The ELISA test currently in use looks for the presence of antibodies that your body might have developed to fight the AIDS virus if it is present in your system. It does not test for the virus itself. A positive ELISA test might not mean you're infected with the AIDS virus. However, it would be a sign that further testing is needed.

There are two kinds of tests that could be used if your blood shows a positive reaction to the ELISA test. One is called the Western Blot test and the other is called IFA. Either of these tests can be used to confirm a positive ELISA test.

A negative test is also not conclusive. If you have been infected with the virus recently, a negative test may mean that your body might not have had time to develop antibodies against the AIDS virus.

Once you are infected, you probably will remain infected for life. It could take years for you to begin showing the symptoms of AIDS.

If you are worried that you may have been infected, find out about the test. It can end a lot of needless worry on your part. It is often available free or at low cost.

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## Would You Like More Information?

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**I**f you'd like to know more about AIDS or whether you should consider an AIDS test, talk to your doctor, local health department, or hospital. In addition, you can get helpful, confidential information from the National AIDS Information line, 1-800-342-AIDS. It's open 24 hours a day. The Spanish hotline is 1-800-344-SIDA (1-800-344-7432). The hotline number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-AIDS-TTY.

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# What Behavior Puts You At Risk?

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**Y**ou are at risk of being infected with the AIDS virus if you have sex with someone who is infected, or if you share drug needles and syringes with someone who is infected.

Since you cannot be sure who has been infected, your chances of coming into contact with the virus increase with the number of sex partners you have.

## **RISKY BEHAVIOR**

Sharing drug needles and syringes.

Anal sex, protected or unprotected.

Vaginal or oral sex with an infected person, or with someone who shoots drugs, or engages in anal sex.

Sex with someone you don't know well (a pickup or prostitute) or with someone you know has several sex partners.

Unprotected sex (without condom and spermicide).

## **SAFE BEHAVIOR**

Not having sex.

Sex with a mutually faithful, uninfected partner.

Not shooting drugs.

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# What Happens When You Take The Test?

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**W**hen you go to take an AIDS test, a small quantity of blood will be drawn from your arm. The blood will then be taken to the laboratory and tested.

You should ask the physician or counselor how you will be informed of the test results. Regardless of your results, you should request counseling to help you better understand what the test means to you.

In many cases, you will want the results of your test kept private. There are two ways this can be done. If the test is "confidential," the results will be available to a limited number of medical personnel. Ask your doctor or counselor who will know the results and how they will be stored.

If you would like the results to be even more private, you may want to ask about an "anonymous" test. With anonymous testing, your results can't be traced to you. In most cases, all information and results are numbered, and you are the only one who knows the number assigned to you.

If you test positive, it is vital you understand that you can infect other people through sexual contact and sharing drug needles and syringes. You can also infect your unborn child. You must contact your sexual partners and tell them about the infection. Professional counseling can go a long way to help you deal with the realities of your test result.



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RESPONDS  
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Part of the America Responds To AIDS brochure series. This brochure has been prepared by the Centers for Disease Control, U.S. Public Health Service. The Centers for Disease Control is the government agency responsible for the prevention and control of diseases, including AIDS, in the United States.

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