

# Be Smart: Get an HIV Test— Know your Status



## The Facts about HIV

### What is HIV?

- ▶ Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS.
- ▶ HIV can weaken the immune system. Eventually a person with HIV can get serious infections or cancers—this is called AIDS.
- ▶ Even people without symptoms suffer ongoing damage to their immune systems and can pass the virus to others.
- ▶ Everyone should know their HIV status and be tested at least once for HIV. People infected with HIV may have no symptoms for many years.

### Who is at risk of being infected with HIV?

- ▶ Anyone who has had unprotected sex (anal, oral or vaginal), particularly with:
  - Anyone who is (knowingly or unknowingly) infected with HIV
  - A man who has sex with other men
  - An injection drug user
- ▶ Anyone who has shared needles or equipment used to inject drugs or steroids or for tattooing or piercing

- ▶ Anyone who has a sexually transmitted disease (STD), such as syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia
- ▶ Anyone (male or female) who is a victim of intimate partner violence, sexual assault or trauma

### Reduce the risk of HIV infection

- ▶ These are some ways to reduce your risk of becoming infected:
  - Know your HIV status, and your partner's
  - Use a condom every time you have sex (anal, vaginal, or oral)
  - If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy and have an HIV-positive partner, talk with your provider
  - Use PrEP (medicine to prevent HIV infection) if you are at risk
  - Get tested for HIV regularly, and ask your partner(s) to get tested regularly, so that you both know your current status
  - Don't inject illicit drugs (those not prescribed by your doctor)
  - If you do inject drugs, never share needles, syringes, or other equipment
- ▶ Talk to your provider about PrEP and other prevention methods to reduce the risk of infection.



## Testing Information

### Should I get an HIV test?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that *all* adults should be tested for HIV as part of their routine medical care. The VA agrees and recommends HIV testing for *all* Veterans—even those who do not think they have risk factors. HIV is a chronic disease and as with many other diseases, it is better to diagnose and treat HIV early, rather than late. Today, we are fortunate to have effective treatment for people infected with HIV. Early treatment will help HIV infected people live longer and lower the chance of transmitting the virus to others.

### Does testing need to be performed at a VA facility?

- ▶ No. You can have an HIV test done outside the VA, but Veteran Benefits will not cover the cost (at some non-VA facilities, you can get an HIV test without giving your name).

### There are two types of HIV tests:

- ▶ **Traditional Blood Test:** Blood is taken from the arm. Results can take up to 2 weeks.
- ▶ **Rapid Tests:** Rapid tests use blood from a finger-stick or fluid from the mouth to look for antibodies to HIV. Results are available in 20 minutes. A negative result does not need to be confirmed. A positive rapid test result must be confirmed with a follow-up test, using the traditional blood test. Results may take 1-2 weeks.

Note: Rapid tests require special equipment and handling. Not every VA medical center or clinic offers them.

### What do the HIV test results mean?

**Positive:** This means you have HIV infection and can pass it to others.

**Negative:** This means either you do not have HIV or you got it so recently that your body has not had time to make enough antibodies to be detected. If you could have been exposed to HIV recently, your provider may recommend that you repeat the test in 3-6 months.

## Your Benefits and HIV

### Can having an HIV test affect my VA Benefits?

No. You always have the right to refuse HIV testing, but getting an HIV test will not affect your medical benefits or any right to care.

All HIV test results are kept private. VA will not give your HIV test results to anyone except medical providers who care for you unless you have given written permission or in these special situations:

- ▶ If a VA employee comes into contact with your blood, such as by an accidental needle-stick
- ▶ Within the VA, if the VA needs the information to see whether you qualify for VA benefits



- ▶ In case of an emergency, if the information is required to provide you with medical care
- ▶ If ordered by a court of law
- ▶ If the Department of Defense or Congress requests it (your name will not be used)
- ▶ For VA-approved scientific research (your name will not be used)
- ▶ For reporting to public health authorities
- ▶ If you are infected with HIV and you tell a VA provider that you've had unprotected sex with someone and you will not tell that partner your HIV status; the provider can tell your partner in order to protect his or her health

**For more information about where you can be tested anonymously, call 1-800-CDC-INFO. The confidentiality of HIV testing results varies in every state, so ask about the reporting requirements in your area.**

[www.hiv.va.gov](http://www.hiv.va.gov)