

# HIV Testing: Say yes to the test

## What is HIV?

- HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV can weaken the immune system.
- Effective treatment allows most people with HIV to live long and healthy lives.
- Even people without symptoms suffer ongoing damage to their immune systems and can pass the virus to others. So early testing and treatment are important.
- Everyone should know their HIV status and be tested at least once for HIV.

## Who is at risk?

- Anyone who has 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
  - » Someone who injects drugs
- Anyone who has shared needles or equipment used to inject drugs or steroids or for tattooing or piercing
- Anyone who has a sexually transmitted illness (STI), such as syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia
- Anyone who is a victim of intimate partner violence, sexual assault or trauma

## Reduce the risk

These are some ways to reduce your risk of becoming infected:

- Get tested for HIV regularly, and ask your partner(s) to get tested regularly, so that you both know your current status.
- Use a condom every time you have sex, for the whole

sex act. Your VA provider can prescribe external (male) or internal condoms if you need them.

- Use PrEP (a medicine that prevents HIV infection) if you are at risk. Talk to your provider about whether PrEP is right for you.
- Practice safer injection drug use by using new, clean syringes and equipment. If you need help to stop using drugs, please talk to your VA provider. If you do inject drugs, syringe service programs can help provide clean equipment.
- If you are pregnant or considering pregnancy and have a partner with HIV, talk with your provider.

## Testing information

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all adults be tested for HIV as part of their routine medical care. 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 it is better to diagnose and treat HIV early, rather than late. Today, we are fortunate to have effective treatment for HIV. Early treatment helps people with HIV live longer and lowers 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 VA, but VA may 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 about 20 minutes. A negative result does not need to be confirmed. A positive rapid test result must be confirmed with a blood test.

### **What do the HIV test results mean?**

**Positive:** This means you have HIV infection and can pass it to others. Talk to your provider about starting treatment right away.

**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.



### **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.

### **Your privacy**

VA can share HIV-related information with your health care providers (VA or non-VA) to provide you with the best care. The MISSION Act allows for HIV-related information to be disclosed without written authorization from the Veteran to a non-Department entity for purposes of providing health care to patients or performing other health care-related activities or functions. All providers follow HIPAA guidelines for keeping private information protected.

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.

For more information on HIV testing and prevention, visit [www.hiv.va.gov](http://www.hiv.va.gov)

