

why should I test?

the benefits of HIV testing



The African HIV Policy Network,
New City Cloisters
196 Old Street
London EC1V 9FR.



Why should I take an HIV test

HIV is the virus known to cause AIDS. Having an HIV test and knowing the results allows you to make clear decisions about your life. Those decisions should be your own. An HIV test enables you to find out whether you are HIV positive or HIV negative. This booklet can help you think about whether HIV testing would be useful for you.

Five good reasons for having an HIV test

It's a free and confidential test

- Testing for HIV at a Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic is free and confidential. This means that the health care workers will not tell other people your results and will keep your information safe and secure. Anyone can get a free HIV test. And no one will know your test results unless you decide to tell them.
- At a GUM clinic you can have a full sexual health check up for other sexually transmitted infections. You can also ask questions about looking after your sexual health.
- You will be offered pre-test counselling which is where you discuss what the test is and what will happen when you get your results. The aim of this is to help you think about HIV testing. You can have several sessions before making any decision. You can discuss things on your mind and talk about how you may cope if you get a positive test result. It is an opportunity to look at some of your personal fears about possibly being positive. You could also get information about organisations which can provide help and support.
- Whatever your result the health care workers will answer your questions, if not they will refer you to someone who can help. If your result is positive you will be given information about HIV and you can decide what help you need.

You can protect yourself

Sex is a valuable part of a relationship. So it is important to be able to enjoy sex without any worries. Protecting yourself against other infections is very important whether you are HIV positive or not. Here are some ways you can protect yourself:

- If your HIV test result is negative, you can protect yourself in order to stay HIV negative by choosing to practice safer sex. This usually means using a condom or Femidom when you have sex.
- If you have a positive result you can protect yourself from other sexually transmitted infections by using condoms or Femidoms. You can also learn more about how to avoid passing on HIV to others.
- An HIV test only tells if you are positive or negative, it does not tell you other people's results. It may be important to consider if your boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife or children should be tested too.
- When you travel to certain countries where health services are poor take your own needles and syringes with you in case you need medical treatment.

You'll be in a position to take greater care of your health

- Treatment for HIV has improved a great deal over the last few years. The sooner you know if you are HIV positive, the more effective these treatments are likely to be.
- You can protect yourself against other conditions like TB or the flu which can affect you for longer and more seriously if you are HIV positive. You can reduce your chances of getting the flu and frequent colds by having a flu vaccine and eating healthily.
- Eating a variety of foods and taking regular exercise can help to keep your body healthy. Reducing your alcohol intake and if you are a smoker, reducing or giving up smoking will also help - there are support groups if this is difficult. Making time for yourself to relax every day is also useful as a way of reducing stress.

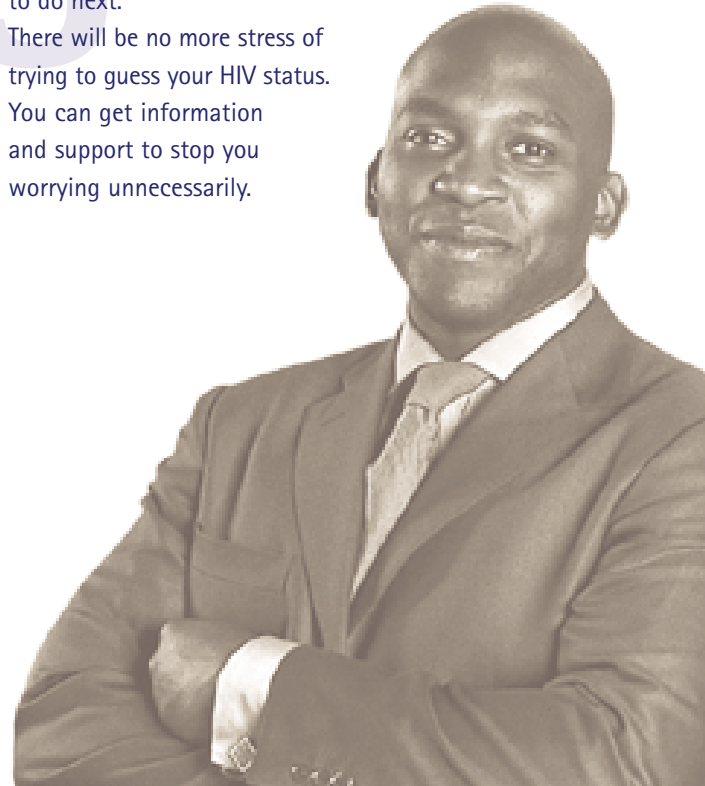
If you are HIV positive, you can decide what is best for you

- Once you know your result, if there are any problems with your health it will be easier to treat the problem. Regular health checks will be able to tell if something is not right, which can then be sorted out. Along with your doctor, you can decide what medicines to take if it becomes necessary to do so.
- HIV can be passed on from a positive pregnant woman to her baby in pregnancy, during delivery and through breast-feeding. The risk can be reduced greatly with specialist medical care. If you know you are HIV positive and thinking of having a baby or are pregnant you can decide how to reduce the risk of passing on HIV to your baby.

- If you know you are HIV positive there are a variety of places you can go to for help or advice. These include places where you can talk with someone about any problems. There are also courses and activities that may help you to relax and be less worried.

It can give you peace of mind

- Whether you are HIV positive or negative, you can take control and plan what to do next.
- There will be no more stress of trying to guess your HIV status.
- You can get information and support to stop you worrying unnecessarily.



Four reasons why you might not want to think about having an HIV test

1 **Waiting for the test result can be a worrying time**

This can be a difficult time, when you are likely to worry about what the result might be. Talking to the staff at the clinic, friends or a helpline may help to reduce the stress during this period.

2 **You are worried about the outcome of the test result**

An HIV positive test result can come as a shock and you may find at first it is very difficult to cope with. If you find out you are HIV positive then post-test counselling, which is when you speak to a health advisor about the test result, can really help. The advisor can talk to you about your worries and give you information on places you can go to get further help from people who are understanding. Coming to terms with a positive result may take time, but it is important to remember you are not alone.

3 **You do not know who you can trust?**

It is important to think carefully about who you talk to about having an HIV test. Remember those people who you tell will also want to know your result. Think through who needs to know and who is most likely to offer support and be trustworthy. If you would rather not speak to any family member or friend you can contact one of the organisations listed at the back of this leaflet for advice and support.

4 **You won't know what to do next**

It can be scary to think about what you would do once you get your result, whether positive or negative. The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. There is a lot of support available to help you make these decisions. Friends and family can be supportive, and there are lots of different organisations you can contact about what to do next.

It is your decision whether or not to take an HIV test, but remember:

- An HIV test is free and confidential if done at a GUM clinic.
- You do not have to tell people you are HIV positive.
- You can talk to someone privately before and after the test if you have your test at the GUM clinic.
- You are not alone - there is help and support available. A list of organisations and their contact details are listed at the back of this booklet.

Where to go for further help:

African AIDS Helpline

0800 096 7500

THT Direct

0845 1221 200

Positively Women

020 7713 1020

Tune into African Community Radio (ACR) on Spectrum Radio 558AM(MW) every Saturday 3-4pm for up-to-date information on services available.

Some organisations also offer courses on computer skills, improving English and other subjects, which may be able to help you improve other areas of your life.

www.tht.org.uk

www.loveafrica.org.uk

Originally produced by the African Health Promotion team at Terrence Higgins Trust and Golden Stool Communication in association with:

Blackliners

National Institute for African Studies

HAAZ

London Ecumenical AIDS Trust

Pachedu Zenzeie and Black Health Agency

This edition produced by NAHIP Partners and the NHS.

