

# thinking about pregnancy?

the advantages of HIV testing



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# HIV testing and pregnancy

## **Are you thinking of having a baby now or in the future?**

Good health is important for everyone, especially if you are thinking of having children now or in the future. The healthier you are, the better chance your baby has of being healthy too. Good health includes eating well, resting, exercising, avoiding stress, managing relationships, enjoying life in general and having regular health checks. Preventing and getting treatment for infections such as HIV is also part of managing good health.

Sexual health checks enable you to get information and advice about sexual health and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. It is becoming more important for African people to seriously think about the importance of regular sexual health checks when having children. If you are pregnant now it is still worth thinking seriously about having a sexual health check, including an HIV test.

## Why should I consider having an HIV test?

If you are having sex, or have had a blood transfusion in other countries where blood is not checked out properly for HIV, you could be at risk of HIV infection.

HIV cannot be seen with the naked eye, and you cannot tell by looking if another person is HIV positive.

The only way you can know for sure is to have an HIV test. In the UK, African people are the second largest group of people affected by HIV. Many African men and women do not know they are HIV positive.

Knowing you are HIV positive or HIV negative means that you can get information and take action to prevent passing on or getting HIV.

A pregnant HIV positive woman can pass on HIV to her baby during pregnancy, labour, delivery and breast-feeding. The numbers of HIV positive children born to African parents is considerably higher than for the rest of the population. This however can be prevented if you know you are HIV positive and take effective and safe methods to reduce the chances of passing on HIV to your baby. If you are thinking of having children now or in the future it is important to consider having an HIV test.

HIV infection affects different people in different ways. It helps if both you and your partner discuss and consider HIV testing together. It is worth knowing that:

- A man who does not know he has HIV can pass on HIV to his girlfriend or wife if she is HIV negative.
- A woman who does not know she has HIV can pass on HIV to her boyfriend or husband if he is HIV negative.
- In the UK the majority of women who are found to be HIV positive in pregnancy are African.
- Many African women who find out they have HIV in pregnancy have been able to have HIV negative babies.
- If you know you are an HIV positive woman you can be supported in making decisions about the best time to become pregnant. You can also decide what steps you want to take to reduce the chances of passing on HIV to your baby during pregnancy, labour, delivery and afterwards.

## What do I need to do before I have an HIV test?

It is important to take time to think about HIV testing because agreeing to an HIV test means you should be prepared for either a negative or positive result. Thinking about what an HIV positive result will mean for you is important as this may effect your life in many ways, it could also mean being able to make decisions to ensure that you live well with HIV.

It is also important to take time to think seriously about what having an HIV positive child might mean. Finding out you are HIV positive whilst you are pregnant or when your child is found to have AIDS may be more difficult so it might be better to take time to think about HIV testing



before you plan for a pregnancy. If you are expecting a baby now, you both can still benefit from having an HIV test.

### **Will people judge me if I am HIV positive?**

Many people do not understand much about HIV and AIDS. If people around you are unsupportive it is worth remembering that you are not the problem - it could be their lack of understanding. Many people with HIV say that once they make that realisation it makes it easier for them to get on with their lives and not worry about what other people think. Support is available to discuss difficult or hurtful issues.

The decision to have or not have an HIV test is yours. Information and support on HIV testing is available from THT Direct or the African AIDS Helpline listed at the back of this leaflet.

### **Will other people be told I am HIV positive?**

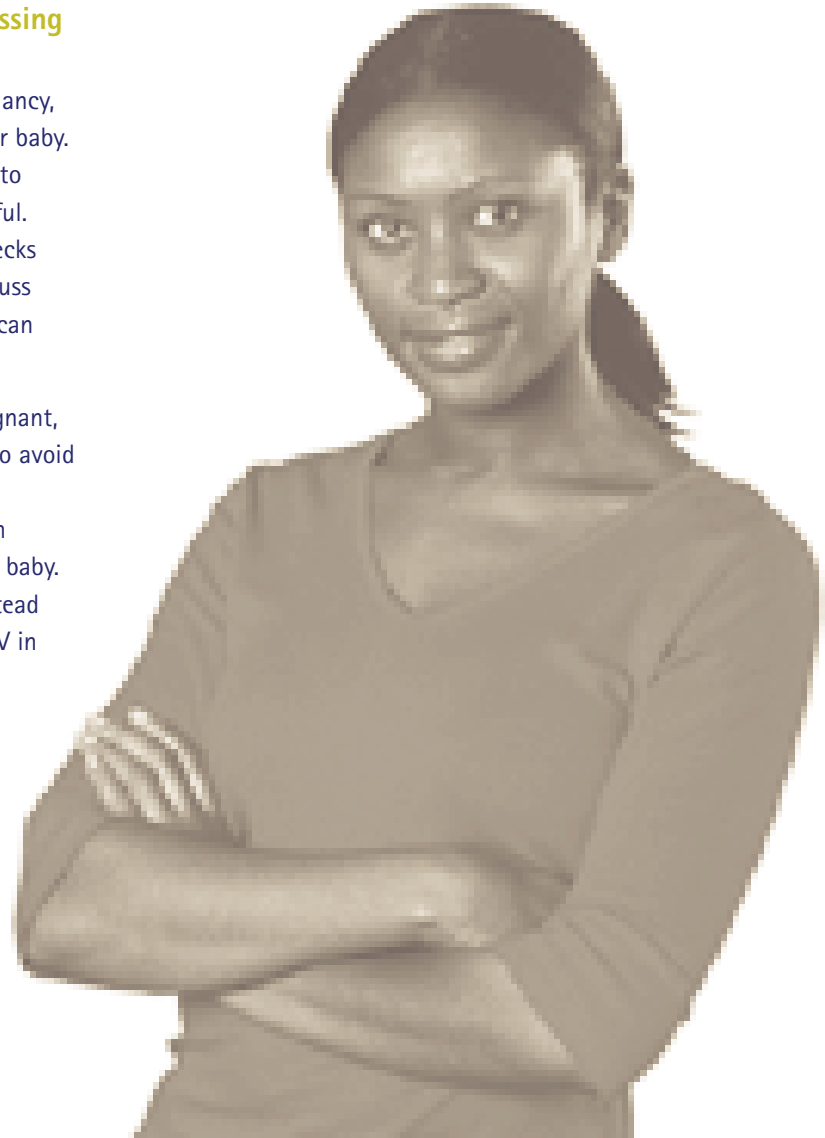
**No, they will not. Your HIV test result will not be passed on to your employers, boyfriend, husband, girlfriend or wife without your permission. If for any reason medical staff need to pass on medical information to other people like your GP (family doctor) you will be told or shown copies of the written information before it is sent. You can ask for any written information to be changed if you are not happy with it.**

## As a woman, what can I do to prevent passing on HIV to my baby?

- If you are HIV negative and remain so during pregnancy, and breast-feeding you will not pass on HIV to your baby.
- Getting information for your husband or boyfriend to enable him to learn more about HIV might be helpful.
- If you are HIV positive, going for regular health checks during pregnancy will provide opportunities to discuss how HIV can be passed on in pregnancy and what can be done to prevent this.

You can get advice on the best times to become pregnant, for example, when you are in good health and how to avoid getting other infections.

- You will be able to decide what medicines you wish to take to prevent passing on HIV infection to your baby.
- You can choose to give your baby formula milk instead of breast milk, which contains large amounts of HIV in HIV positive women.



## As a man what can I do to prevent the chances of my baby born with HIV?

- If you are HIV negative, ensuring you remain HIV negative means you will not pass on HIV infection to the baby's mother.
- If you are HIV positive, you can get information and support about safe ways to get your girlfriend or wife pregnant.
- If you are HIV positive and your girlfriend or wife is negative, having sex with a condom can help prevent her becoming HIV positive during pregnancy or the breast-feeding period.
- You can support your HIV positive girlfriend or wife to maintain good health and decide which medicines to take to prevent HIV infection to your baby.
- You can support your HIV positive girlfriend or wife in deciding to feed the baby with formula milk instead of breast milk, as breast milk is known to contain large amounts of HIV.

## What increases the chances of an HIV positive woman passing on HIV to her baby?

### The chances of passing on HIV are higher:

- If the baby is born prematurely (before the date it is due).
- If the mother becomes unwell from an HIV related illness at any time during the pregnancy.
- If the mother is in labour for longer than six hours.
- If the baby is breastfed.

Passing on HIV infection can be avoided, provided you know you are HIV positive. Health care and support for women and men with HIV is much improved, and can reduce the chance of an HIV positive woman passing on HIV to her baby.

Will I know straight away if my baby is HIV positive?

If HIV negative then 95% of babies will be given the all clear within three months and every baby's HIV status will be confirmed by 15 months.

### Some important things to know about HIV testing and HIV:

- An HIV test will let you know if you are HIV positive or not.
- You can have a free and confidential (which means no one will be told without your permission) HIV test at any Genito-Urinary Medicine Clinic, also known as a sexual health clinic, before or during pregnancy.
- In the UK, most hospitals offer free HIV testing to all pregnant women.

- The hospital and clinic will help explain and arrange HIV testing for your boyfriend or husband too if you would like them to.
- You cannot be tested against your will just because you are an African man or woman.
- You can be HIV positive and live well for many years.
- An HIV positive test does not mean you have AIDS (having AIDS means you are very sick due to HIV).
- An HIV test does not tell you how long you will remain well or when you will become sick.
- In the UK, HIV can be controlled with HIV medicines and there are improved chances that you and your baby will remain in good health.



## Can I get medical care?

This will depend on your immigration status. If you have recently arrived in the UK then you will find your immigration status stamped in your passport.

- If you are a student nurse receiving a bursary, work permit holder, refugee or asylum seeker, you are entitled to free medical care regardless of how long you have lived in the UK.
- If you have been living in the UK for at least 12 months as a student or long term visitor you are entitled to free medical care (you can leave the UK temporarily, for example on holiday, as long as you are not away for more than 3 months in the 12 months preceding treatment).
- All treatment in a hospital's Accident and Emergency Department is free to everyone regardless of immigration status.
- Children take on the chargeable status of their parents, so if either parent is exempt from charges for hospital treatment, then the child will also be exempt. If both parents have to pay for treatment, then the child will also have to pay.
- Testing for HIV, and the counselling associated with the test, is free to everyone regardless of immigration status, but you may be asked to pay for further treatment if the test is positive.
- If you are a student (except student nurses) or long-term visitor who has lived in the UK for less than 12 months continuously, you may be asked to pay for any treatment that is not provided in an Accident and Emergency Department.

**You can get further information about HIV testing and pregnancy from the following organisations:**

**African AIDS Helpline**

**0800 0967 500**

**Brook Helpline**

**0800 0185 023**

**Family Planning Association Helpline**

*(Mondays -Fridays 9am-7pm)*

**0845 310 1334**

**THT Direct**

**0845 12 21 200**

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

[www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)

[www.loveafrica.org.uk](http://www.loveafrica.org.uk)

*This information is correct at time of going to press. Regulations relating to access to care are subject to amendments by the Government.*

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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.

