TESTING FOR HIV INFECTION
Deciding to be tested for HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus, may not be easy. If you or someone you know has questions about being tested for HIV, here are some facts that may help.

What tests are most commonly used to detect HIV infection?

There are three types of HIV tests commonly used.

1. The ELISA is the standard screening test used to detect HIV antibodies in a sample of blood, urine or saliva. If HIV antibodies are detected by an ELISA, the test is repeated. If the second test reacts to the presence of HIV antibodies, the sample is tested using the Western blot and IFA to confirm. Results from this type of HIV test are usually available within one to two weeks.

2. The rapid HIV test detects antibodies to HIV-1. A small sample of blood is taken using a “fingerstick” or small pin prick to the finger. A positive test result suggests that antibodies to HIV are present. If HIV antibodies are not present in the blood, the test result is interpreted as negative. These preliminary results may be available in less than 30 minutes, after which a confirmatory test must be conducted. The confirmatory results are available within one to two weeks.

3. Oral HIV testing is an alternative to blood testing. The oral HIV test uses a sample of mouth tissue taken from the cheek and gum. This tissue contains high levels of antibodies and is free of most of the contaminants found in saliva. If a test result is positive, another test on the same sample is conducted automatically to confirm HIV infection. No needle or blood is involved in this type of HIV test. Test results are usually available within three days.

How long should I wait before being tested?

Before getting tested, it is important to wait three months from the time you think that HIV exposure may have occurred. This is enough time for most people to develop antibodies to HIV. The average time for HIV antibodies to appear is 25 days. Otherwise, a person may test negative even though they have HIV. This is called the “window period.” During the “window period” and prior to HIV testing, you should avoid behavior that puts others at risk for HIV, including unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sexual intercourse and blood-to-blood contact, as in sharing needles.

Should I be tested?

If you think you might have been exposed to HIV, you are encouraged to seek individual counseling and testing. It is possible for people to be infected for years and to look and feel healthy, not knowing they are infected with HIV.

You may be at risk for HIV infection if you have—

- Shared needles and syringes.
- Had sex with anyone who injects drugs.
- Had sex with men who have had sex with other men.
- Had sex with multiple partners.

What is the difference between anonymous and confidential testing?

Anonymous testing ensures the privacy of the person being tested. This means that neither names nor any other identifying information that could link a person to their results is recorded. Instead, code names or numbers are used so that only the person who gets the HIV test can find out their test result.

Confidential testing ensures that no one can be given the results of an HIV test without the test taker’s written permission, except as required by state law. Test results become part of a person’s medical file at the facility where the test was administered. States that require HIV-positive test results to be reported are required by law to keep the information confidential.

Why is counseling recommended both before and after taking an HIV test?

Deciding whether or not to get an HIV test is not easy. Fear and worry about the test are very common feelings, both before the test and while waiting for the results. Many people fear the reactions of family, friends, employers and others if test results are positive. Counseling may help you decide what to do and how to respond to the results of the test.

Pretest counseling is important for a clear understanding of what the test is and what the test can and cannot tell you. It will help you understand if you are at risk for HIV infection and how to prevent the spread of HIV. Pretest counseling may vary from one test site to another.

Post-test counseling can help you understand what your test results mean. It can give you information about how to protect yourself and others from HIV, no matter what the test result is. If your result is positive for HIV infection, a counselor can also refer you for medical, legal and emotional support services, as needed, and can tell you about the kinds of services that are available in your area for people living with HIV infection.

What does a negative test result mean?

A negative test result shows that no HIV antibodies were found in your blood at the time the test was taken. A negative test result can mean either that you are not infected with HIV or that you are infected, but your body has not yet produced enough antibodies to show up on the test.

If you are advised to have the test repeated, avoid behaviors that put you and others at risk of HIV infection. Then, if you test negative six months later, you probably do not have HIV. To stay uninfected, you can take steps to protect yourself by not having sex without using a latex (or polyurethane) condom and by not sharing needles and syringes.

What does a positive test result mean?

A positive antibody test result means that you have HIV antibodies in your blood and you are infected with HIV. However, it does not mean that you have developed AIDS. The test cannot tell if or when you will develop AIDS.

A positive test result means that you can infect other people with HIV through sex (vaginal, anal or oral) or by sharing needles and syringes. Also, a pregnant woman who has HIV can infect her baby during pregnancy or birth or through breast feeding.

Your health care provider or HIV/AIDS counselor will talk to you in detail about your test results. He or she can also advise you about taking care of your health and about living with HIV infection. Several types of treatments are available that have helped people living with HIV stay healthy for many years. The goal of most treatments is to extend and improve the quality of life for people with HIV and AIDS by suppressing enough of the virus over time to avoid damage to the immune system. Although not a cure, many treatments have brought hope and new strength to people living with HIV and AIDS.

People living with HIV can get help in notifying sex or needle-sharing partners of their possible exposure to HIV through partner notification programs, which provide prevention counseling, HIV testing and referrals to other services. To learn about partner notification services in your area, contact your state or local public health department.

What else do I need to know?

- Costs—The cost for HIV testing varies. Some clinics offer free testing or request a small donation. Fees for tests given by private health care providers may be higher.

- Laws—Laws and regulations for reporting test results vary from state to state. Anonymous testing is not available everywhere. In some states, positive HIV test results must be reported to the local public health department, where they are kept confidential.
What about donating blood to get tested?

Do not donate blood to find out your HIV status. The Red Cross tests blood to safeguard the blood supply, not to provide a testing service for people who want to know their HIV status. Because these tests may not detect HIV infection in its earliest stages, people who think they may be infected could be putting other people at risk by donating blood. To find out where HIV testing services are available, call your local Red Cross chapter or station, health department or AIDS service organization.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread by—

- Having vaginal, oral or anal sex with someone who has HIV.
- Sharing needles or syringes with someone who has HIV.
- Pregnancy, birth or breast feeding, if the mother has HIV.

For more information, contact—

- Your local American Red Cross chapter or station. To locate the one closest to you, go to www.redcross.org.
- The CDC Web site for recently revised guidelines on HIV counseling and testing. These guidelines are available at www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/rt-counseling.htm.
- Your doctor or your healthcare provider.
- Your state or local public health department.
- Your local AIDS service organization.
American Red Cross HIV/AIDS Programs
The American Red Cross has Basic, African American, Hispanic and Workplace HIV/AIDS programs. Youth materials, including Act SMART, "The Party" and "Don’t Forget Sherrie," are also available. Contact your local American Red Cross chapter or station for additional information.

All people share the responsibility to protect themselves and others from HIV infection.