



How do I know if I have HIV?

There is no way to know just by looking at someone if they have HIV. Many people who have HIV experience few or no symptoms for many years. The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested. The good news is that getting tested has never been easier—there are many ways of testing for HIV that are quick and easy. Your doctor can order an HIV test just like they would order a cholesterol test.

Whether you have been tested before or this is the first time, please remember that all HIV testing is confidential. This means that you and your doctor are the only people who know you took the test. You also have the right to refuse an HIV test.

What is a rapid HIV test?

A rapid HIV test (Oraquick) is an oral test (no blood required!) that will tell you whether or not your body has made HIV antibodies, all in just under 30 minutes. Antibodies are your body's natural response to an infection.

Because the test can only tell us whether your body has made HIV antibodies, there is a "window period" between infection with HIV and when the test will detect antibodies. For most people, this "window period" is three months or less. While it may take several months for detectable levels of antibodies to appear in the blood, HIV can be transmitted at any time after infection.

Other resources:

CDC HIV/AIDS homepage:

cdc.gov/actagainstaids/basics/index.html

Information from the U.S. Federal Government:

aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/

To learn more, visit
MedStarHealth.org

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treat people.**

**Rapid HIV
testing and
the benefits
of knowing
your status**



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What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that weakens the immune system. It attacks a specific type of immune system cell (the CD-4 Helper or "T" cell) which decreases the body's ability to fight off other infections. At this time, there are medications to help slow HIV's attack on the immune system but there is no cure. If left untreated, HIV can progress to AIDS.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a condition that occurs when the HIV virus has significantly weakened the immune system and it is difficult for the body to fight off infections that do not typically bother people with healthy immune systems.

Most importantly, HIV is a preventable disease. In order to most effectively slow the spread of HIV, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) recommends that every person age 13 to 64 get tested at least once in their lifetime. Those at increased risk of infection, such as those who have unprotected sex and inject drugs, should be tested once per year.

What are the benefits of knowing my status?

If you are **HIV negative**, you can learn how to stay that way. Studies have shown that people who know their HIV status (whether HIV positive or negative) adopt healthier behaviors than people who do not know their HIV status.

If you are **HIV positive**, starting treatment early will improve treatment options and give you a head start to living a longer, healthier life.



What if my HIV test comes back negative?

A negative test means that no HIV antibodies have been found. This could mean one of two things:

- You do not have HIV, or
- You have HIV but your body has not created HIV antibodies yet.

This might happen if you are in the "window period" of HIV infection. A negative test doesn't mean that you cannot become infected with HIV, so you should learn how to prevent HIV and stay negative.

How can I stay negative?

- Reduce risky behaviors such as unprotected sex (vaginal, anal and oral) and sharing needles
- Use protection such as condoms and dental dams if you choose to have sex (vaginal, anal and oral)
- If you are at risk, continue getting tested regularly
- Consult with your doctor about HIV prophylactic drug options that can reduce your risk of infection
- Consult your doctor about additional personalized ways to prevent infection

What if my HIV test comes back positive?

A positive test result means HIV antibodies may be in your body. Positive results must always be confirmed by another test that is sent to the lab. A confirmed positive test means that you have HIV. The most important thing you need to know is that there are treatments for HIV that can help you lead a long and healthy life. Getting diagnosed early can improve your quality of life and your treatment options.

What can I do to stay healthy and protect others?

The D.C. Department of Health's Red Carpet Entry Program suggest that all people with a confirmed positive test meet with a physician specializing in HIV within 24 hours of diagnosis to discuss treatment options, **regardless of your insurance status**. Currently, the best way to protect your own health and that of others is to begin antiretroviral (ARV) therapy. This keeps your body's immune system healthy and greatly reduces the risk of spreading the virus to other people.

HIV can be spread during anal, oral or vaginal sex. You can also pass HIV to others if you share injection equipment or needles. A pregnant woman who has HIV can pass the virus to the fetus in the womb or the baby during birth or breastfeeding. Conversely, HIV cannot be passed by casual contact like hugging, using the same bathroom or sharing eating utensils.

