

# FACT SHEET FIVE

## THE HIV TEST

### What is HIV?

HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus which can damage the body's defence system so that it cannot fight infection. HIV is not easily transmitted – you cannot become infected through everyday social contact.

HIV is transmitted in three main ways:

- Through penetrative sexual intercourse
- By injecting drug users sharing syringes and needles
- From an infected mother to her unborn child

In the past, a number of people were infected through infected blood products. This may still occur in some areas of the world, but is extremely unlikely in most developed countries, including the UK, where all blood has been screened since October 1985.

People who have been infected with the virus do not all have AIDS. In fact, most of them are still healthy and do not know they are infected. From what we know about the condition at present, we think that between a quarter and a third of these people will develop AIDS in about five to seven years' time. Others may have less severe illnesses due to the virus and some will remain well for long periods.

### What is the test?

When the body is infected by HIV, it reacts by producing antibodies. The test looks for these antibodies.

It is NOT a test for AIDS.

It will only tell you whether or not you have been infected by the virus. The test will NOT tell you if you have AIDS, and cannot predict whether you will go on to develop AIDS.

A doctor or nurse will take a sample of blood – usually from your arm – and then send it to a laboratory for the HIV antibody test. Because the laboratory has to confirm the test, it may be about two weeks before you get your results.

## What does the result mean?

A negative result means you have probably not been infected with HIV.

However, it can take 2-3 months for antibodies to develop after you have been infected with the virus. This means that you should wait up to 3 months after the last occasion when you think you have been infected before you have the test. And, of course, a negative result does not mean you cannot become infected in future if you put yourself at risk.

A positive result means that you have the virus. It does not mean that you have AIDS, or that you will necessarily get AIDS.

It does mean that you can pass the virus on to other people through sexual contact or blood – even though you may look and feel well.

It does not mean that you can infect someone by normal, everyday contact. Working, eating, drinking or sharing a house with people are all quite safe.

## Should you have the test?

Only you can decide. Think carefully. The result may fundamentally affect you life.

### For

- Knowing that you do not have the virus may put your mind at ease and stop you worrying unduly about AIDS.
- If you do have the virus and then develop symptoms of AIDS-related disease, your doctor may be able to start treatment earlier, which may benefit you.
- You may find it easier to practice safer sex if you know you have the virus (but you should be doing this anyway).
- If your partner has the virus, your results may help you decide how to carry on your sex life.

### Against

- No major life assurance company will give life assurance to someone who has the virus.

- All life assurance companies ask searching questions if you have taken the test, even if the result was negative, and some may not give you life assurance.
- Your housing and employment may be put at risk if you have the virus and it could adversely affect your chance of getting a new mortgage.
- Some people with the virus have been rejected by their families and friends, and have been left to cope alone.

It may help you to write down a list of all the reasons why you are considering the test. Put it away somewhere private for a few days, then look at it again and ask yourself if you still feel the same.

## Can I talk to someone about it?

If you want to talk about the test, or any other aspect of HIV or AIDS with a trained adviser, you can contact one at your local Sexually Transmitted Disease, Genito-Urinary Medicine or Venereal Disease Clinic, or you can call:

National AIDS helpline – 0800 567 123

Calls are free, confidential and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- Phone lines in other languages:

All are telephone - 0800 917 2227 - and available between 6.00 pm to 10.00 pm

PUNJABI – Saturday  
 CANTONESE – Sunday  
 BENGALI – Monday  
 URDU – Tuesday  
 ARABIC – Wednesday  
 GUJARATI – Thursday  
 HINDI – Friday

- A Minicom Service is available for people with hearing difficulties – 0800 521 361  
 - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

## Where do I get a test?

If, after thinking and talking it over, you decide to take the test, you can ask your GP to arrange it for you. Or you can contact a clinic anywhere in the UK. These clinics are listed in the phone book under Sexually Transmitted Diseases, or Genito-Urinary Medicine, or Venereal Disease. There is no charge.

The result, and the fact that you have been tested, is confidential between you and the doctor requesting the test and other staff immediately concerned with your care. It may be difficult to keep the result confidential if you tell friends you are having the test. They will want to know the result.

The result will not be given to anyone but you. You should make another appointment at the clinic because it is important to talk to someone about the result, whether or not your test shows that you have been infected by HIV.

The best defence against HIV and AIDS is information. Read this leaflet as many times as you need to, and/or talk to an adviser at an STD clinic or the National AIDS helpline, before you made a decision about having the test.