

This information has been prepared to help you decide if you should take an HIV test. It was developed by the California Medical Association and modified for our patients.

1. What is HIV infection?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (“AIDS”).

2. If I am infected with HIV, will I get AIDS?

Although almost all people with HIV infection develop AIDS, it is not known if all people with HIV infection will do so. HIV infection can cause a broad range of medical conditions. Many HIV infected persons have no symptoms and are able to remain healthy and work for a number of years. However, it appears that, in most cases, HIV infection will over time cause some harm to a person’s immune system. When that happens, the person develops various infections, diseases or other problems. If a person’s immune system becomes so weak that he or she suffers from certain serious or fatal illnesses, it is said that the person has AIDS. A person with AIDS often gets certain types of cancer or other infections that a healthy person with a normal immune system can fight off. It is not known why many HIV infected persons suffer a moderate or severe breakdown of their immune systems while some persons do not get sick from their infections. It is possible that other factors, such as emotional stress, fatigue, poor nutrition, alcohol or other drug abuse, may cause an HIV infection to get worse or become AIDS.

3. How do I know if I might have been infected by HIV?

HIV infection can be passed on through sexual intercourse (vaginal, rectal or oral), by direct blood to blood contact (sharing needles), and by a pregnant woman to her child before or during birth or by breastfeeding. Since 1985, the nation’s blood supply has been tested for HIV, and the risk from that source is minimal (but not zero). There is no evidence that HIV can be transmitted through the air (coughing, sneezing), through water (swimming), by food, by insect bites or by saliva,

sweat or tears. There is also no evidence that HIV can be passed on by cooking or eating with an HIV infected person.

4. What is an HIV test?

Currently, in the most commonly used HIV tests, a person’s blood is tested to see if it contains certain substances called antibodies. If present, these show that the person has probably been infected with HIV. One type of antibody test, called the ELISA test, is usually run first. If the result is positive, the ELISA is normally done again. If the second result is also positive, then another test, called the Western Blot test, is run to confirm the positive results.

5. Can I consent to an HIV test?

You may consent if you are an adult. If you are less than 12 years old or have a physical or mental disability that prevents capacity to consent, a legal representative could consent.

6. Why should a pregnant person particularly consider HIV testing?

There is now research showing that if a pregnant woman, who is positive for HIV, receives drug treatment during her pregnancy, she significantly decreases the chance that her infant will be born with the virus.

7. What does it mean if my test results are positive?

Confirmed positive test results means that you probably have an HIV infection. In that case, you should consider yourself contagious and are able to pass this virus on to others (see #6 above).

8. What does it mean if I have a negative blood test?

A negative test means that there are no signs of HIV infection in your blood. This generally means either: (1) that you have not been infected by HIV or (2) that you have been infected so recently that your blood has not yet made antibodies. If you have not been infected with HIV, this does not mean that you are immune to infection. You can still be infected in the future if you participate in

“high risk” activities (multiple sexual partners, IV drug use or certain homosexual activities).

9. How accurate are the test results?

HIV test results are very reliable if performed by a good laboratory. If you have engaged in some of the above-described activities recently, it may take a number of weeks before the test can detect the presence of antibodies. Therefore, it may be necessary to repeat the test in 6 months to see if you have been infected.

10. Why should I take an HIV test?

See 6. There are other reasons for taking an HIV test. Your physician may want the test results in order to decide what sort of medical care you need. Without knowing your HIV status, your physician may not be able to diagnose your condition or give you the most appropriate medical treatment. If your test is positive, you will know that you must take steps to protect other persons from your infection and you will be better able to decide about your future healthcare. Further, you can try to take care of your general health and avoid doing things that could lead to AIDS, as discussed earlier. In addition, you may get medical treatment that may slow the progress of the infection and extend the time in which you have no symptomatic disease.

11. Are there any risks involved in taking the HIV test?

The test itself will not harm you. It has the same minimal risks that any blood test has, i.e. small bruise, etc. Remember, however, if your test returns positive, you may become very upset or depressed. Although much effort is expended to keep the results confidential, there are legal requirements for reporting, and no system is foolproof. There is a slight but unlikely chance that someone such as your employer, landlord, or insurance company could improperly or accidentally learn about your results.

12. What will happen if I refuse to take an HIV test?

That is always your choice. However, if you are HIV positive and we do not know about it, medical treatment would not be started and your infant would have a higher chance of getting the virus.

13. Who will be told about my HIV test results?

There are special laws in North Carolina that protect the confidentiality of HIV results. Your physician cannot tell other persons what your test results are without your permission, except in a few situations. First, your physician can tell your other healthcare providers about your results. Second, your positive results will be forwarded to the HIV/STD Control Section, as required by law. A counselor from the Section will contact you to discuss your infection, appropriate referrals and partner notification. Third, if you and your physician do not talk with your partner, the physician is required by law to report the partner’s name to the HIV/STD Control Section for notification.

14. Are there other places to have the test run?

The State of North Carolina pays for testing and counseling at all local health departments and several other sites across the state.