

COMMON FAQs ON HIV TESTING

Should I get an HIV Test?

Get Tested for HIV is you answer yes to any of the following questions -

- * Have you injected drugs or steroids or shared equipment (such as needles, syringes, works) with others?
- * Have you had unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex with men who have sex with men, multiple partners, or anonymous partners?
- * Have you exchanged sex for drugs or money?
- * Have you been diagnosed with or treated for hepatitis, tuberculosis (TB), or a sexually transmitted disease (STD), like syphilis?
- * Have you had unprotected sex with someone who could answer yes to any of the above questions?

If you or your partner has had many sex partners, then you have more of a chance of being infected with HIV.

All women who are pregnant should be tested during each pregnancy.

How long after a possible exposure should I wait to get tested for HIV?

Most HIV tests are antibody tests that measure the antibodies your body makes against HIV. It can take some time for the immune system to produce enough antibodies for the antibody test to detect and this time period can vary from person to person. This time period is commonly referred to as the “**window period**”.

Most people will develop detectable antibodies within 2 to 8 weeks (the average is 25 days). Even so, there is a chance that some individuals will take longer to develop detectable antibodies. Therefore, if the initial negative HIV test was conducted within the first 3 months after possible exposure, repeat testing should be considered >3 months after the exposure occurred to account for the possibility of a false-negative result. Ninety seven percent will develop antibodies in the first 3 months following the time of their infection. In very rare cases, it can take up to 6 months to develop antibodies to HIV.

Another type of test is an RNA test, which detects the HIV virus directly. The time between HIV infection and RNA detection is 9-11 days. These tests, which are more costly and used less often than antibody tests.

How accurate are antibody tests?

Antibody tests are extremely accurate when it comes to detecting the presence of HIV antibodies. ELISA tests are very sensitive and so will detect very small amounts of HIV antibody. There is a very small chance that a result could come back as ‘**false positive**’.

A false positive result means that although a person may not be infected with HIV, their antibody test may come back positive. All positive test results are followed up with a confirmatory test, such as:

* A Western blot assay – One of the oldest but most accurate confirmatory antibody tests.

* A second ELISA – In resource-poor settings with relatively high prevalence, a second ELISA test may be used to confirm a diagnosis. The second test will usually be a different commercial brand and will use a different method of detection to the first.

When two tests are combined, the chance of getting an inaccurate result is less than 0.1%.

Rapid HIV tests

Rapid tests can use either a blood sample or oral fluids. They are easy to use and do not require laboratory facilities or highly trained staff. All positive results from a rapid test must be followed up with a confirmatory test, the results of which can take from a few days to a few weeks.

Antigen test (P24 test)

Antigens are the substances found on a foreign body or germ that trigger the production of antibodies in the body. The antigen on HIV that most commonly provokes an antibody response is the protein P24. Early in HIV infection, P24 is produced in excess and can be detected in the blood serum (although as HIV becomes fully established in the body it will fade to undetectable levels).

P24 antigen tests now most often used as a component of 'fourth generation' tests.

Fourth generation tests - Technology used at Disha Pathology Services

Some of the most modern HIV tests combine P24 antigen tests with standard antibody tests to reduce the 'diagnostic window'. Testing for antibodies and P24 antigen simultaneously has the advantage of enabling earlier and more accurate HIV detection.

PCR test

A PCR test (Polymerase Chain Reaction test) can detect the genetic material of HIV rather than the antibodies to the virus, and so can identify HIV in the blood within two or three weeks of infection. The test is also known as a viral load test and HIV NAAT (nucleic acid amplification testing).



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Disha Pathology Services

2nd Floor, Shroff Eye Hospital, 222 S V Road, Bandra (W), Mumbai 400050.

Phone: 022 26410500 Email: dishapathology@vsnl.net Visit: www.pathologylabindia.com