HIV/AIDS: General Information & Testing in the Emergency Department

What Is HIV?

HIV is the common name for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is a retrovirus. This means it can enter the body’s own cells and become part of the genetic make up of those cells.

When someone has HIV, the body tries to fight the virus by making antibodies. An HIV test looks for these. It can take days to a few weeks for the body to make antibodies. If they are found, the person is “HIV-positive”. The body can’t get rid of HIV infection. Someone who tests positive for HIV will always test positive. There will always be antibodies.

What Is AIDS?

AIDS is the common name for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. A diagnosis of AIDS means that the immune system has been harmed by HIV. AIDS is a diagnosis based on the state of a person’s health. It is not the same as having HIV infection.

It can take years for AIDS to develop. A very small number of people never progress to AIDS. In time, HIV weakens the immune system in most people. This leaves them more likely to develop infection and disease than a person without HIV.

There are medicines that slow down the damage caused by HIV and help the immune system. Someone who tests positive for HIV can maintain good health by taking these medicines.

How Can You Get HIV?

HIV infection can occur when
1. A person is exposed to certain body fluids (see below) of someone who has HIV and
2. The amount of HIV in the body fluids is enough to spread it to another person and
3. HIV gets into the bloodstream of the person who is exposed to the fluids.
These body fluids carry HIV.

- blood
- semen
- breast milk
- vaginal fluids

If any of these fluids get into the bloodstream, they can increase the risk of getting HIV. They can enter the bloodstream in these ways.

1. Sharing needles or injection supplies (works) that contain blood.
2. Anal or vaginal sex without a barrier (e.g. condom).

   Note: Anal or vaginal sexual intercourse carries a higher risk of HIV infection than oral sexual activity because of small tears that occur in the anus and vagina. Also, the tissue of the vagina and cervix is more easily infected than other skin tissues.

3. Oral sex without a barrier (i.e. condom, dental dam).
4. Blood or blood product transfusion that contains the HIV virus.

   Note: The blood supply in the United States is the safest it has been. Blood donors are carefully screened. Donated blood goes through many tests to make sure it is safe.

5. By way of a mother who has HIV infection during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding of an infant.

**How Can HIV Infection Be Prevented?**

People who engage in sexual activities that might expose them to blood, semen, or vaginal fluids can protect themselves by using condoms, female condoms, and dental dams. People who inject drugs can protect themselves by using clean needles and works and by not sharing them with anyone else. Women who have HIV can protect their infants from HIV by taking HIV medicines during their pregnancies and birth of their children. The HIV virus is present in breast milk. Women with HIV infection are counseled to bottle feed their infants.
Research has confirmed that HIV does **not** stay alive when exposed to air.

- Sharing public toilets and shaking hands are very safe.
- There is **not** enough virus in saliva to share HIV by kissing.
- HIV is **not** spread by mosquitoes.

**Who Should Get Tested for HIV?**

An HIV screening test is recommended for patients in all health care settings according to the CDC. Persons at high risk for HIV infection should be screened at least once a year. It is important to know whether you have HIV so you can have treatment before the HIV harms your immune system.

Testing should be done for anyone who may have been exposed to HIV. If there is a chance the person was exposed to HIV just before the test, the body might not have started making antibodies. Repeat tests may be needed in 6 weeks, 12 weeks, and 6 months, even if the first test is negative.

Pregnant women should be tested to prevent spread of the virus to the baby during pregnancy and birth. It is easy and safe to protect the baby from HIV by using anti-HIV medicines.

**Can a patient refuse an HIV test?**

It is your choice to have a HIV screening test. A patient has a right to refuse an HIV test. Health care services and treatment cannot be denied because a patient refuses to have an HIV test.

**What is a Rapid HIV Test?**

The UW Health Emergency Department uses Rapid HIV Tests to screen for HIV when patients have certain symptoms or when they have been in situations where exposure to HIV is possible. Rapid tests use blood (from a vein or finger stick) or oral fluids to look for HIV antibodies. Results of a rapid test are often ready in an hour and given to the patient while still in the Emergency Department.
What does it Mean if the Rapid HIV Test is Non-Reactive?

If a rapid test is non-reactive, it means that the test has not found HIV antibodies. For most people, this means that they have not been infected with HIV. If there is a chance the person was exposed to HIV just before the test, the body might not have started making antibodies yet. In this case, repeat testing about 3 months after the first test is advised.

What does it Mean if the Rapid Test is Reactive?

If a rapid test is reactive, it means that the test has found HIV antibodies. While this test is very accurate, it is recommended that all patients with a reactive rapid test have a confirmatory test to make a diagnosis. A person is not “HIV-positive” unless both a rapid test and a confirmatory test are positive.

What Happens after a Reactive Rapid HIV Test?

A reactive rapid test result requires follow-up with an HIV/AIDS Specialist.

A patient who receives a reactive rapid test result in the UW Health Emergency Department should ask Emergency Department staff to contact the UW Retention in Care Social Worker for immediate assistance. The patient can also contact the UW Infectious Disease Clinic at 608-263-0946 and ask to speak with a social worker to schedule an appointment. The Infectious Disease Clinic is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

An appointment will be scheduled within 1-2 business days after contacting the clinic regardless of the patient’s insurance status or ability to pay. At the first appointment, the patient will meet with a doctor and receive the confirmatory test result. If a diagnosis of HIV infection is made, more blood tests will be ordered to check the status of the immune system. A social worker will be available to talk about any questions or concerns the patient has.

It is important for a person who tests positive for HIV to see a doctor who specializes in HIV/AIDS as soon as possible. There are medicines to preserve the immune system, control the virus, and reduce the chance of giving the virus to others. It is helpful to form a good relationship with an HIV specialist so the best choices can be made about treatment.

Who has Access to Results of HIV Testing by Law?

State law permits only a very few number of people to know if someone has HIV infection. Positive test results are reported to public health officials. Strict laws protect confidential information on HI
Where Can a Person Find Out More?

Below is a list of Wisconsin resources and AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs).

**University of Wisconsin** 608-263-0946
HIV/AIDS Comprehensive Care Program (Infectious Disease Clinic)
   offers affordable, accessible and confidential medical and social services regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

**AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW)** 608-252-6540
www.aidsnetwork.org
   provides HIV testing, prevention services, case management, legal services, support groups, food pantry and dental services for people in Madison and surrounding counties.

**Wisconsin HIV/STD/Hepatitis C Information and Referral Center**
800-334-2437
www.irc-wisconsin.gov
   provides information on the prevention, transmission, and treatment of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), and hepatitis.

**Public Health Madison & Dane County, HIV Partner Services** 608-243-0411
   provides confidential HIV counseling and testing resources for partners of people with HIV infection.

**Wisconsin Division of Public Health, AIDS/HIV Program**
608-267-5287

**OraQuick® In-Home HIV Test**
www.oraquick.com
   HIV test kit allows people to test themselves at home by using an oral swab and testing solution. Results can be read in 20 to 40 minutes. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved and available nationally in several major pharmacies and retailers and online.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911.
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