

Spotlight on Health

HIV Screening

HIV is a chronic and treatable infection. Though the infection can't be cured, treatment can make a big difference. It can prevent the infection from progressing to AIDS.¹ People who receive treatment can live a near-normal lifespan.

HIV is transmitted sexually or through injection drug use.² People with the infection can spread HIV to other people. Most new infections come from people who don't know they are infected.³ Use of condoms and clean needles helps prevent the spread. Treatment also helps by lowering the amount of virus in the infected person.¹

What Is HIV Screening?

An HIV screen is a blood test for people who don't have signs of the infection. Screening is very important, because about 20% of the people living with HIV don't know they have it.⁴ So, they are not getting treated. This means their infection could progress to AIDS, the last and most serious stage of the disease. It also means they could spread HIV to their sexual partner.¹ If pregnant, they could spread HIV to their fetus.

Who Should Be Screened?

Experts say everyone aged 13 to 65 years should get an HIV test.² They also say all pregnant women should get screened each time they are pregnant. So having an HIV test is an important part of taking care of your health.

Some people should be screened every year. These include²:

- Men who have sex with men
- Injection drug users

Other people should be screened every 3 to 5 years. These include people who²:

- Have another infection that is spread sexually (such as hepatitis C)
- Don't use condoms during sex
- Have a partner who has HIV, is bisexual, or is an injection drug user
- Exchange sex for money or drugs
- Live where HIV is more common



Three Stages of HIV Infection

1. Acute stage
 - No symptoms or flu-like symptoms
 - Large amount of virus in the body
 - High risk of spreading the virus to others
2. Latent stage
 - Lasts an average of 10 years
 - No symptoms, yet virus is still in the body
 - Can spread virus to others
3. AIDS
 - Lasts about 3 years, ending in death
 - Many symptoms, including rapid weight loss, fatigue, and unusual infections and cancers
 - Can spread virus to others

Treatment can keep the infection in the latent stage and help people live a near-normal lifespan.

What if the Screen Is Positive?

If the screening test is positive, a follow-up test is needed to be sure HIV is present. If the follow-up test is also positive, it means the person has HIV.

People with a positive result should see their doctor right away. Their doctor can help them learn more about HIV and how to stay as healthy as possible. People with infection should^{5,6}:

- Have a baseline medical assessment to learn more about their health
- Be tested for other sexually transmitted infections
- Learn about the benefits and risks of HIV treatment
- Decide if they are ready to start lifelong HIV treatment
- Learn about healthy lifestyle choices
- Learn how and when to tell other people about their HIV status
- Learn how to protect their partner from HIV during sex
- Learn about counseling services and support groups

Getting treatment as soon as possible is the most important thing. Treatment keeps the virus under control. It helps protect the infected person's health and the health of their partner.

How Can the Laboratory Help?

Quest Diagnostics offers the 4th generation HIV test to screen for HIV infection in all 3 stages (see sidebar, page 1). Not all tests can detect HIV in the acute stage, but this one often can. If the screen is positive, the follow-up tests are done right away. So when results are reported, it's clear whether the person has HIV or not. Results are available in 1 or 2 days.

References

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