

HIV

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

Key points to know about HIV Antibody Testing:

- At Health Services, HIV testing is confidential. See “who else will know about the test?” for more information on confidential testing and to learn about sites where anonymous testing is available.
- The window period means that it is possible to have a false negative test result. Antibodies may sometimes be detectable as early as two weeks after exposure. The HIV antibody test is approximately 95% accurate and at 6 months approximately 99% accurate. Learn more under “test results” below.
- A positive test result needs to be confirmed with additional testing. Any screening test can result in some false positive results. Therefore, a positive test is considered a “preliminary positive” and you must have an additional test to confirm the presence of HIV antibodies. Learn more under “test results” below.
- If you are only having an HIV test done today, don’t forget that you can get tested for other STIs by making an appointment with a provider here at Health Services. (Call 401-863-3953)

What is the HIV antibody test?

The HIV antibody test is a blood test that shows if you have been infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (also known as HIV). HIV is the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), a serious condition that weakens your body’s ability to fight off diseases. Being infected with HIV does not mean you have AIDS. It can take years for AIDS to develop in a HIV

infected person, but if HIV is in your body, you can pass the virus to others. HIV is passed from one person to another through blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. Anyone who has unprotected sex or shares used needles with an infected person can be exposed to HIV. Infected mothers can pass the virus to their babies during pregnancy, childbirth, or while breastfeeding.

Test results

The blood HIV antibody test is overall a very sensitive test, 99% accurate. However, a couple of other issues need to be considered when interpreting results. If your test results are negative, no HIV antibodies were found in the sample obtained. This means that you are either not infected with HIV, or you have recently been infected and it’s too soon for the antibodies to show up in the sample. The length of time between infection with HIV and when there are enough antibodies to be detected by the HIV test is called the “window period.” During the window period an HIV test may be false negative. With the evolution of more sensitive tests, HIV antibodies may sometimes be detectable as early as 2 weeks after exposure. You can protect yourself while you’re waiting for another test by using condoms, dental dams, and/or by not sharing needles.

How will the HIV antibody test help me?

It will help you to know if you have HIV. If your test is negative, you can stop worrying and take steps to protect yourself from HIV. If you are pregnant, or thinking of becoming pregnant, it’s important to find out if you’ve been infected by HIV. New studies have shown that taking the HIV medications during pregnancy may greatly

lower the chances of passing HIV to your baby.
If your test is confirmed as positive, you can get help now.

- Get early medical treatment so you can live a longer, healthier life.
- Find support programs to help you, your family, and your partner(s).
- Get information about services for HIV positive people.
- Protect your baby if you are pregnant or a new mother.
- Avoid passing HIV to others.
- Ask your partner(s) to get tested and/or stay in treatment.

If your test is positive, it is very important that your contacts be tested too. If you don't want to tell the people with whom you've had sex or shared needles about your test results yourself, the Partner Notification Program can help. A partner notification counselor will tell your partner(s) that they have been exposed to HIV without saying your name. For more information about this program, ask your RN or provider or call the Rhode Island Department of Health at 401.222-2320. Your call will remain anonymous.

For more information about HIV you can contact:

BWell Health Promotion
401.863-2794
www.brown.edu/bwell

The Rhode Island Department of Health
Office of HIV/AIDS & Viral Hepatitis
401.222-2320
<http://www.health.ri.gov/hiv>

AIDS Project Rhode Island
401.831-5522
<http://www.aidsprojectri.org>