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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: [patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk) if you would like a reference list.

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# ***HIV – What is it and why am I being tested?*** (page 1 of 3)

## **What is HIV?**

HIV stands for the human immunodeficiency virus. It is a virus which weakens your body's immune system – the body's defence against diseases. When someone is described as living with HIV, they have become infected with HIV and have the HIV virus in their body.

## **What is an HIV test?**

When a virus enters your body, your body produces antibodies. If you have been infected with HIV, HIV antibodies will be detectable in your blood.

An HIV test is a blood test which checks for the presence of HIV antibodies and/or part of the HIV virus.

## **Why am I being tested for HIV?**

HIV testing is a routine blood test carried out in many departments in the hospital, just like having a blood test to look for diabetes or thyroid problems. HIV testing has been done routinely in pregnant women for over a decade, as well as in sexual health clinics, and is now being carried out in other outpatient clinics and wards.

The only way to be sure if you have been infected with HIV is to have an HIV test. Many people with HIV feel well so you cannot tell from symptoms alone. However, if you are unwell or have certain medical conditions, your doctor or nurse may want to rule out HIV as a cause of your symptoms.

Although there is currently no cure for HIV it's very important that it is diagnosed as early as possible as treatment can keep the virus under control and the immune system healthy. There are now very effective drugs available to treat HIV that have few side effects.

People on HIV treatment can live a healthy, active life with normal life expectancy, particularly if the infection is picked up early. The sooner the infection is detected, the easier it is to treat. However, even when diagnosed at a late stage, many people with HIV make a good recovery on treatment.

## **How is HIV transmitted?**

HIV can be passed on through infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids, rectal secretions or breast milk.

1. The most common way of catching HIV in the UK is through anal or vaginal sex without a condom. Oral sex usually carries a much lower risk.

Anyone can catch HIV this way: man or woman, straight or gay, black or white. Condoms are currently the best way to reduce the risk of becoming infected with HIV or passing it to someone else during sex.

2. Use of contaminated needles. Sharing needles is a high risk behaviour and a potential way of becoming infected with HIV. It is an uncommon route of transmission in the UK. However, if you ever inject any drugs or are given an injection, particularly outside of the UK (for example, recreational drugs, vaccinations, steroids or any other medical treatment), you should always make sure it is with a clean needle that has not been used by anybody else.
3. Blood and blood products. All blood donors are tested for HIV. Due to advances in medical screening, there is very little risk that HIV transmission could now occur through a blood transfusion or during an organ transplant. Most countries have effective screening mechanisms to ensure that this does not happen. However, you may be at risk if you received blood or blood products in the past, particularly in some countries outside of the UK.
4. Mother to child transmission. Children can become infected from their mother at childbirth or through breast feeding, if the mother is HIV positive.

This risk can be usually be prevented if the doctors know the mother's HIV status in advance and she is put on effective HIV treatment early in pregnancy. Women taking effective HIV treatment can safely become pregnant and have a baby.

Over 95% of women in the UK now have HIV tests during pregnancy. This has led to huge reductions in the numbers of babies who become infected with HIV - that's the power of this test!

### **What does an HIV test involve?**

A sample of blood will be taken, usually from your arm, and checked in a laboratory for HIV antibodies. Finger prick tests are also available in some settings.

You will be told the result of your test by your doctor or nurse.

If your blood test is positive, this means HIV antibodies are present and you have been exposed to HIV. A second test will need to be taken to confirm this. The team looking after you will explain the results and refer you to an HIV specialist to discuss what treatment would be best. With early treatment you can live a full and productive life.

A negative result means no HIV antibodies were found, which usually means you do not have HIV at the time of testing. However if you think you have had a recent risk of HIV infection, we advise you to have a repeat test 4-6 weeks after the possible risk occurred. Please discuss this with the team looking after you.

### **If I have an HIV test will it affect my insurance premiums?**

The simple answer is no! You do not have to declare to any insurance company if you have had an HIV test, unless the result is positive for HIV antibodies. If the result is positive and has been confirmed then just like many other health conditions you would need to declare it to your insurance company.

## Further sources of information on HIV and HIV testing

### **HIV aware**

[www.hivaware.org.uk](http://www.hivaware.org.uk)

### **Saving Lives UK**

[www.savinglivesuk.com](http://www.savinglivesuk.com)

### **National AIDS Trust (NAT)**

[www.nat.org.uk](http://www.nat.org.uk)

### **Terrence Higgins Trust (THT)**

[www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)