What happens after an HIV test and getting the results?

FAST FACTS

• If your result is negative, you can stop worrying – but it's good to keep testing regularly.

• If your result is positive or ‘reactive’, you will need to give another blood sample to have your results confirmed.

• Remember that HIV is now a manageable illness – if you do test positive your healthcare provider can explain treatment options to keep you healthy.

Encouraging yourself to have an HIV test is often the hardest step to take, but it is usually not as bad as you imagine. We look at some of the major questions that people ask about what happens after an HIV test.

How do I get my results?

Before your test, the tester should explain how you will get your test results. Depending on the type of test you take, you will have to wait either a few minutes for your results (rapid test or self-testing), or anywhere between a couple of days and a couple of weeks (laboratory test).

If your result is negative, the health centre will contact you to let you know that you are negative. All positive and ‘reactive’ results will have to be checked again, so you will be asked to come back for further testing.

If you have used a self-testing kit at home and you test positive, you should follow up with your local healthcare professional to get your result confirmed.
What does a negative result mean?

If your HIV test result comes back negative, this means that you don't have HIV. If you have put yourself at risk since you had your last test then you'll need to get tested again. Also remember that different HIV tests can only detect HIV one to three months after exposure. Using a condom (and injecting safely if you use drugs) is the best way to protect yourself from HIV.

Be aware that testing negative for HIV doesn’t mean that your partners are HIV-negative. HIV tests only apply to the person who took the test. If any of your previous or current partners are worried about HIV, encourage them to take a test.

What does a ‘reactive’ test result mean?

A reactive test result is a possible positive result that needs to be confirmed with extra laboratory testing, before a final HIV-positive result can be given. To do this, the healthcare worker will talk you through everything, including any worries that you may have.

You will need to give another blood sample, which will then be sent to the lab for testing. Your diagnosis won't be given until after this extra test. At this stage, it's very important to follow the advice of the healthcare professional.

What does a positive test result mean?

If you receive an HIV-positive result, the healthcare worker will talk to you about what this means and what will happen next. For most people, receiving a positive diagnosis can be a shocking and emotional experience – this is completely normal. The healthcare worker is there to support you and to answer any questions that you have.

The day I was given a positive HIV diagnosis, I thought my life would be ruled by it. But today I see HIV as a tiny virus I control.

Treatment means that HIV is now a manageable illness. Your healthcare provider can link you to support and treatment services, or any other health services that you need. Any questions that you have you can ask them – this is their job. You will most likely be asked to schedule another appointment with them in the very near future. It’s very important to keep appointments and use the support offered to you. You may also be offered screening tests for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis.

Find out what questions to ask and what support is available to help you cope with the results on our ‘Newly diagnosed’ page.

I went for a rapid test in the clinic attached to the hospital and
never expected the answer to be that I was positive. I fell to the floor, cried like I was in a soap opera and asked, 'who's going to raise my children?' The tester was so amazing, so helpful in talking me down from this reaction, telling me he'd known people living with HIV for over 25 years. I latched onto those words like a life vest for those first few months.

Will my test results be kept private?

Your test results should remain 100% confidential between you and those who are involved in your care and treatment. You can talk to your healthcare professional about your rights and how to tell other people if and when you are ready.

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Sources:

Aidsmap ‘Reactive Results’ [Accessed June 6th, 2015]
Aidsmap ‘For People Who have a Positive Test Result’ [Accessed June 6th, 2015]