

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Voluntary Counselling and testing (VCT)

What is Voluntary Counselling and testing (VCT)?

HIV testing is a process you go through when you want to find out if you have been infected with HIV (not to be confused with AIDS). VCT is a new approach to HIV testing that has been developed and used successfully in many parts of the world.

What does the term voluntary mean?

This means that you make the decision to take the test or not. Anyone interested in having the test done can discuss their doubts and concerns confidentially with a trained counsellor, before deciding whether to go ahead with the testing. You are completely free to decline testing if you feel uncomfortable with the procedure at any point.

Why do I need counselling before the test?

This is to make sure that you fully understand the purpose of the test, its procedures and what the results mean once the test has been done. This is also an opportunity for you to ask the counsellor any questions at all concerning HIV and the test. If you agree to take the test after understanding all the information given to you, you will be asked to give consent by signing a form.

How does the test work?

As a response to the HIV virus, your body produces a special protein to notify your immune system of its presence, this is called an antibody. The tests look for these antibodies within your blood which shows whether or not you have been infected with HIV. New technologies have sped up the time required for the test, with the quickest (rapid test) taking around 30 minutes.

What happens during the test?

The test will be carried out by a trained health professional. You will be asked to provide a very small blood sample from your fingers or upper arm, after which you wait for the results. It is possible that the test will need to be repeated, in which case another blood sample will be required from you.



How accurate is the test?

Antibody test results for HIV are accurate more than 99.5% of the time. This can be done twice or more to confirm your HIV status.

There are special instances when testing may not be totally accurate:

- 1) If you were infected very recently (usually between three weeks and three months), when the body may not have started to produce the antibodies yet;
- 2) Young children born to HIV positive mothers, who will have their mother's antibodies in their blood and will test HIV positive.

In these cases, testing can be deferred or other tests can be used.

What do the results mean?

A positive result means that you are infected with HIV.

A negative result means that you have not been exposed to the HIV virus in the last two to three months.

Who will be informed of the results?

Confidentiality is one of the most important aspects of this practice. Nobody will know unless you choose to tell them.

What happens at post-test counselling?

After receiving the results, a counsellor will discuss the results and their implications with you. This is a crucial part of the procedure. The counsellor will go through the next steps and the options available to you to help you accept and manage your HIV status that would cause the least disruption to your life and the lives of those around you.

Regardless of your results, it is likely that you will be advised to review your sexual and other practices that can expose you to the risk of HIV transmission.

What does a positive result mean for me?

If you have HIV, there are options available for you to lead a healthy life. It is likely that you will need anti-retroviral drugs (ARD's) therapy, the standard treatment for HIV. HIV can also bring out other latent infections such as Tuberculosis; if you have TB, health professionals can help you manage and control this and other infections. The counsellor will provide you with the information where such help can be given to you.

It is possible that you may have other sexually transmitted diseases alongside HIV, which will require additional testing. It may also be advisable that you contemplate

informing the people that will be affected by your HIV status and may require testing themselves. If you are pregnant, there are specialist maternal services available to you in order to reduce the chance of passing the HIV infection onto your baby.

What does a negative result mean for me?

The results can only show that you have not acquired HIV up to two to three months ago. Regular testing is good health practice. Advice will be given on how you can make sure that you reduce your exposure to the risk of getting the infection in the future, such as the use of contraception.

What can I do to reduce my chances of HIV transmission?

Change in sexual practices such as the use of condoms, effective family planning strategies and participation in regular sexual transmitted infection (STI) screening programmes can all help to protect you from acquiring the infection or passing it onto other people. The counsellor will give you the details on how to access these services.

Do I need Follow-up support?

Whatever your result, other specialist support services are available for you to ensure that you are coping well. Additional counselling can be arranged for emotional distress, peer support, or assistance with financial concerns, future planning, child care issues, housing, or other practical concerns. These follow-up sessions will also be confidential, but you may want to bring a partner, or a close family member or friends with you for support.

Who should be tested?

You are encouraged to come forward for testing if:

- 1) You suspects that you have been exposed to HIV
- 2) You already have a STI
- 3) You are pregnant
- 4) You have shared needles in the past
- 5) You are a health worker with direct exposure to blood
- 6) You are unsure of your sexual partner's risky behaviours
- 7) You simply want to find out your HIV status.

Figure 1: HIV VCT procedure at a glance:

