How long does an HIV test take? [1]

Dear Alice,

How long does it take to get results from an HIV test?

? Wondering

Answer

Dear Wondering,

Waiting for test results can certainly be stressful ? and while the past few decades of research on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) have made many advances in testing technology, it's tough to give an exact estimate of how long it takes to get test results. There are many factors to consider, including: how long someone has waited to get tested after an exposure (more on that later), the type of HIV test completed, and how long it takes for a particular community health center or lab to analyze and report the test result to the patient. Also, sometimes the results must go through a health care provider first, who will then relay them to the patient, which can take more time. The good news is that many testing options are fairly quick. While the most rigorous lab-based tests can take more than three hours to produce a result, some rapid tests can take as little as two minutes.

In general, the turn-around-time for HIV testing depends on the type of testing performed. These include:

- **At-home HIV tests** [2] (which can be picked up at your local pharmacy or ordered online) test for antibodies using an oral-swab and can produce readable results within 20 to 40 minutes. Alternatively, kits that use blood from a finger-prick must be mailed to a licensed lab which can then report results to the patient within a day or two once the sample is received, depending on cost and shipping logistics (for example, shipments could be delayed by weather).

- **Rapid testing at a community health center or clinic** usually requires blood (either drawn by puncturing a vein or from a finger prick) or saliva (i.e., from an oral swab). Results can take anywhere from 2 to 40 minutes but generally take 10 to 20 minutes.

- **Laboratory-based tests** use methods that are more accurate, but may also take longer (generally 30 minutes to more than 3 hours). This makes laboratory-based testing well suited for confirming the results of a rapid or at home test. These types of tests may also be used as a secondary or confirmatory testing in special situations, such as when an
individual has had a very high-risk exposure or is presenting with early symptoms of HIV infection. Most laboratory-based testing requires blood to be drawn, but some can use urine, blood, or saliva.

Keep in mind that no matter what method is used, it’s recommended that people wait a period of time after exposure before testing can even be started. Why, you ask? After exposure to the HIV virus, the body needs to produce a sufficient level of antibodies for the results of an infection to be detected by any test. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a test three months after potential exposure will likely produce an accurate result. But, in some rare cases, it might take a person up to six months to produce enough antibodies. For additional information on when to get tested, check out HIV antibodies at 3 or 6 months in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

What if the results are inconclusive? Unfortunately, this happens and it means that it's unclear if the results were positive or negative. In that case, waiting 14 days and then getting tested again is recommended. A re-test may be done on the same sample as before, or a new sample may need to be collected, depending on the situation. Because of this, additional testing may mean that it will take even more time before a clear result is produced, but it can give peace of mind regarding the accuracy of the results. Finally, it might be helping to be aware that re-testing is usually not recommended for people who are on anti-retroviral therapy (ART).

In the meantime, if you think you’ve been exposed to HIV, have not been able to get tested yet, and are sexually active, it’s recommended that you practice safer sex (oral, vaginal, or anal) during the time you or your partner(s) are waiting for testing to begin, as well as while you’re waiting for the results. Safer sex reduces the risk of potential exposure to your partner(s) while you wait and minimizes the risk of additional exposure for yourself.

Still have questions regarding HIV testing, such as what type of testing is most accessible? How much does it cost to get tested? Can your results be kept confidential? To learn more, check out the HIV/AIDS category in the Sexual & Reproductive Health archives. To address these concerns individually, it’s recommended that you talk with your health care provider or a professional at your local sexual health clinic. They can help you make decisions that are most appropriate for your overall health and lifestyle. You might also want to check out the following resources for more information on testing centers:

- 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
- Text your zip code to KNOW IT (566948)
- CDC National HIV, STD and Hepatitis Testing
- Planned Parenthood
- Gay Men’s Health Crisis

Here’s hoping you didn’t have to wait long to get results (answers) from this response!

Alice!

Category:
Immunizations, Screenings, & Tests
Sexual & Reproductive Health
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's)
HIV/AIDS
Related questions

What is AIDS? [15]
Routes of HIV transmission? [16]
HIV conversion sickness? [17]
Blood donor has false positive HIV test result? What does this mean? [18]

Resources

HIV Testing and Treatment (Morningside) [19]
Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) (Morningside) [20]
Medical Services (Morningside) [21]
Medical Services (CUMC) [22]

Published date:
Apr 05, 1996
Last reviewed on:
Aug 19, 2016

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-long-does-hiv-test-take-0

Links
[8] https://gettested.cdc.gov/
[9] https://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-center