

TAKING AN HIV TEST IS TAKING CARE OF YOUR HEALTH



Introduction

This brochure provides you with information about testing for HIV-infection (the **H**uman **I**mmunodeficiency **V**irus that causes AIDS or **A**cquired **I**mmuno**D**eficiency **S**yndrome).

The aim of this brochure is to help you to take an informed decision about taking an HIV test. However, it is not meant to replace a doctor's visit.

How does it develop and what are the symptoms?

Shortly after the infection, some people will show flue-like symptoms while others may not show any symptoms at all. Therefore it is difficult to determine without a test, if someone really has been infected with HIV.

If someone is infected with HIV, the virus attacks the immune system of the body. This makes it more difficult for the body to fight infection. As long as the body's own defence mechanisms are still able to resist the virus, you will stay in relatively good health. But after some time, usually 5 to 10 years (different from person to person), HIV will have severely weakened the immune system. This makes HIV-infected people vulnerable for infections that somebody with a healthy immune system would never get: these are called opportunistic infections. Once a person who is infected with HIV gets these opportunistic infections, he has reached the AIDS stadium. In short, it can take a long while before you notice symptoms of an HIV-infection.

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Why should I know my HIV status?

Many people of African origin, are not aware of their HIV infection. The majority only discovers this when they already have AIDS and are very ill. When HIV is diagnosed late, precious time is lost for proper treatment and care. Taking an HIV test helps you to improve and maintain your health and knowing your HIV status enables you to take measures to prevent infecting others. Without knowing, one can transmit the virus.

Everybody has a responsibility to look after their own health and the health of others, especially of their own sexual partner(s)!

“Many people of African origin, are not aware of their HIV infection”

What are the advantages of an HIV test?

There are only advantages, no matter what the result will be.

- If the test is negative, you will have peace of mind and you can take steps to stay negative!
- If the test is positive, you will get the right care straight away.

Furthermore, in Belgium AIDS is not a fatal disease anymore. Thanks to effective medication, called 'antiretroviral therapy', HIV infection has become a chronic disease. Antiretroviral drugs are most effective when taken at an early stage of the infection. When you start at a later stage, their effectiveness is reduced. Therefore, early detection allows you to begin with the therapy at the right moment with the best effect. This medication is provided free of cost by law in Belgium.

“There are only advantages, no matter what the result will be.”

What is safe sex?

Safe sex rules provide protection of infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The most important rules are:

- Always use a male condom or female condom during sexual intercourse, vaginal as well as anal.
- Prevent ejaculation in the mouth during oral sex and do not swallow the semen. It is better not to have oral sex (mouth-to-vagina) during menstruation.
- It is recommended to have yourself immunized against hepatitis B.

“Safe sex rules provide protection of infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections.”

When should I have an HIV-test?

An HIV-test is recommended in the following situations:

- You have (had) unprotected sexual contacts with occasional partner(s)
- You have (had) a sexually transmitted infection
- You are pregnant or you are planning to get pregnant
- You are having doubts about your or your partners' risk behaviour
- You do not want to use condoms anymore in your stable relationship
- You want to start a new relationship
- You used drugs intravenously and either shared or used needles that were used by someone else

What is an HIV test?

An HIV test does not detect HIV as such, but the antibodies to HIV in the blood. From 2 up to 6 weeks after the HIV-infection, the body starts producing antibodies. These antibodies spread in the blood and are detectable in the laboratory. When these antibodies are found in the blood, the test is positive. This means that you are HIV infected, also called 'being seropositive'.

When no HIV-antibodies are found in the blood, the test is negative. This means that you are not HIV-infected (or 'seronegative') or you are at the beginning of the infection (see serologic window). However, a negative test does not prevent any infection in the future. You must continue to protect yourself!

"An HIV test does not detect HIV as such, but the antibodies to HIV in the blood"

"A negative test does not prevent any infection in the future"

What is the 'serologic window'?

This is the period of 6 weeks immediately after an HIV infection has occurred. During this time, the HIV-antibodies are not often detectable in the blood. Most tests carried out in that period will turn out to be negative. For a conclusive test result you will need to wait until 6 weeks after the possible HIV-infection date. If you have a test within that period, the doctor may ask you to retake the test 6 weeks later to exclude any doubts.

“Most tests carried out in serologic window will turn out to be negative”

How long do I have to wait for the results?

Regular HIV-test: If you take a regular HIV-test, the results are known in a week.

Rapid HIV-test: Certain centres (*see list in the annex*) offer rapid HIV-testing. In this case, the result is known in half an hour. If the result is negative, you know that you are not infected (if you are not in the window period). However, if the result of a rapid test appears to be positive, it must be reconfirmed by a more specific test. In exceptional cases the rapid test may give false positive results, which will be excluded by the reconfirmation test.

If I get tested, will the doctors disclose the results to other people?

All doctors and health staff are committed to the duty of professional confidentiality. This prohibits them to reveal your HIV status to any one else, unless you give them explicit permission. However, this does not mean that the test is anonymous. Several people dealing with your medical file will know your name. But because all of them are committed to the duty of professional confidentiality, your name will not be revealed to any other person.

You can also choose to take an anonymous HIV-test. In this case, you do not give your name, but your blood sample will be registered at the laboratory with a code and a number that you present when you come to collect your test results. However, not all clinics offer anonymous tests, only specialised centres (see list in the annex).

“Your name will not be revealed to any other person”

Is an HIV-test done automatically at every medical consultation?

No, you have to give your consent for the HIV test. Therefore, if your blood was examined previously, this does not mean you were tested for HIV. Moreover, the Belgian law never requires an HIV-test, not even for immigration, pregnancy, studies, employment or illness.

“You have to give your consent for the HIV test”

How much does an HIV-test cost?

If you go to your doctor for an HIV-test, you will pay for the test together with your medical consultation. Usually about 80% are reimbursed by your mutuality. There are also certain centres who offer a free HIV-test, two of these centres are: Helpcenter- ITG in Antwerp and the Centre Elisa of Saint-Pierre Hospital in Brussels (see list in the annex).

If I am HIV-positive, will I get medication?

Under Belgian law, free antiretroviral therapy is offered to everyone living in Belgium. Even people without a legal residence permit can get medication through the OCMW/CPAS.

What happens if I go to the doctor and ask for an HIV test?

1) Counselling before the test

The doctor will give you information about the test and the implications of a possible negative or positive result. He or she will also discuss with you if you have (had) potential risks. During this counselling you will have the possibility to ask questions and discuss your doubts and fears. After the counselling, it is your personal decision whether or not you want to go through with the test. No one can force you or decide in your place.

“After the counselling, it is your personal decision whether or not you want to go through with the test”

2) The test

If you decide to take the test, blood will be taken by the doctor or a nurse and your blood sample will be examined for anti-HIV antibodies (also see 'What is an HIV test?').

3) Counselling after the test (when you get your results)

If your result is negative:

The doctor will give you all the necessary information about how to stay negative. A negative result does not mean that you are protected against HIV or that you will not get infected in the future. To avoid an HIV infection, you must use protection when having sex (using male or female condoms) and/or use your own clean injection needle if you use drugs intravenously.

"Continue to protect yourself"

If your result is positive:

- You will receive proper care immediately. The doctor will discuss your current state of health with you and make sure you receive psychosocial support that will help you to cope with the new situation.
- The doctor will monitor your health regularly in order to give you the right treatment in time. The medical team will also give you all the necessary information to maintain or improve your health.
- The medical team will provide you with information on how to avoid infecting your partner(s). You will be advised to inform your (ex) partner(s) about your status and to use condoms at every sexual contact.
- If you plan to get pregnant, you will be informed about the necessary measures to minimize the risk for your baby and your partner.

“You will receive proper care”

Test and treatment after an HIV exposure (post exposure prophylaxis or PEP)

In certain circumstances, HIV-treatment is given in case of emergency, that is when someone recently got exposed to a risk of HIV-infection.

Post exposure prophylaxis or PEP is able to stop the virus from spreading and prevents the breakout of the symptoms. In order to be effective, this preventive treatment needs to be taken within the first 72 hours after the risk occurred. This treatment contains a therapy of 3 different drugs to be taken during 4 weeks and is followed up by regular medical check-ups during 6 months.

Before treatment is prescribed, the doctor will evaluate the infection risk that has occurred.

“PEP needs to be taken within the first 72 hours after the risk occurred”

Preventive HIV post-exposure treatment can be given in the following risk situations:

- Rape or sexual assault
- If the condom ripped or slipped during sexual contact with someone known to be seropositive
- If you pricked yourself on an abandoned needle which contained fresh blood.
- Health care workers, who have accidentally been pricked with a needle previously used for an HIV positive person
- Health care workers, who have accidentally been in direct contact with liquids or biological tissue of an HIV-positive person (blood, vaginal fluids, ect.).

If you find yourself in one of these situations, consult a doctor immediately or ring the help-desk at one of the AIDS reference centres (see list in the annex).

Where can I go for an HIV-test in Belgium?

You can choose to either ask your family doctor for an HIV test, the hospital or a specialized HIV/AIDS centre.

Centre that offers anonymous, rapid and free testing.

Helpcenter – ITG

Sint-Andriesstraat 7, 2000 Antwerp

Tel: 03/216 02 88

E-mail: helpcenter@itg.be

Website: www.helpcenteritg.be

Consultations without appointment:

Mondays from 17h to 19h

Fridays from 17h to 19h

Centres offering anonymous and free testing.

Centre Elisa

César de Paepe Clinic (3rd floor)

Rue des Alexiens 11, 1000 Brussels

Tel: 02/535 30 03

E-mail: maladiesinfectieuses@stpierre-bru.be

Consultations without appointment:

Mondays from 8h to 13h15

Thursdays from 16h30 to 19h15

Coordination Provinciale Sida-Assuétudes

(provincial coordination AIDS and drug addiction)

Rue Dr Haibe 4, 5002 St Servais

Tel: 081/72 16 21

E-mail: sida.toxicomanie@province.namur.be

Consultations without appointment:

Tuesdays from 16h to 18h

Thursdays from 14h to 16h

Asbl SIDA-I.S.T. Charleroi-Mons

(AIDS- STI Charleroi- Mons)

Boulevard Zoé Durion 1 (2nd floor), 6000 Charleroi

Tel: 071/92 54 10

E-mail: sidamst@chu-charleroi.be

Website: www.sida-charleroimons.be

Centres offering an HIV test

Antwerp

Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM)

AIDS reference centre offering STI/HIV/AIDS testing, treatment and patient follow-up

Nationalestraat 155, 2000 Antwerp

Tel: 03/247 64 65

E-mail: helpcenter@itg.be

Website: www.itg.be

Gh@pro

Free and anonymous assistance for women and men working in prostitution

Verversrui 3, 2000 Antwerp

Tel: 03/293 95 91

GSM: 0474/98 57 66

E-mail: ghapro@telenet.be

Website: www.ghapro.be

Freeclinic

Assistance to people using drugs

Van Arteveldestraat 64, 2060 Antwerp

Tel: 03/201 12 60

Fax: 03/201 12 99

E-mail: info@free-clinic.be

Website: www.free-clinic.be

Oost-Vlaanderen

Universitair Ziekenhuis Gent

(UZGent: University Hospital of Ghent)

AIDS reference centre offering STI/HIV/AIDS

testing, treatment and patient follow-up -

Polyclinic 2 – 1st floor

De Pintelaan 185, 9000 Ghent

Tel: 09/332 89 19

E-mail: algemene.inwendige@uzgent.be

Pasop

Prevention of STI and HIV/AIDS among prostitutes
and their clients

Brabantdam 100 B, 9000 Ghent

Tel: 03/233 47 67

E-mail: pasop@skynet.be

Website: www.pasop.info

Vlaams Brabant

Universitair Ziekenhuis Gasthuisberg (University Hospital Gasthuisberg)

AIDS reference centre offering STI/HIV/AIDS testing, treatment and patient follow-up

Herestraat 49, 3000 Leuven

Tel: 016/34 44 88

E-mail : conventie.ial@uz.leuven.be

Brussels

Universitair Ziekenhuis Brussel (University Hospital of Brussels)

AIDS reference centre offering STI/HIV/AIDS testing, treatment and patient follow-up

Laarbeeklaan 101, 1090 Brussels

Tel: 02/477 60 01

C.H.U. Saint-Pierre (Saint-Pierre Hospital)

AIDS reference centre offering STI/HIV/AIDS testing, treatment and patient follow-up

CETIM

Rue Haute 322, 1000 Brussels

Tel: 02/535 31 77

E-mail: maladiesinfectieuses@stpierre-bru.be

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**Vlaamse
overheid**



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Institute of Tropical Medicine
Nationalestraat 155
2000 Antwerp
Tel: 03/247 64 63
03/247 64 81

hivsam@itg.be
www.itg.be/hivsam