

Conditions favourable to sexual health *These strategies do not have a direct impact on HIV transmission, but include different practices and contexts that promote good sexual health and contribute to putting other strategies in place.*



GETTING TESTED REGULARLY FOR HIV

Getting a blood test on a regular basis that can detect whether a person has been infected with HIV

Description

- Testing makes it possible to detect whether a person has been infected with HIV. Two types of tests are currently available in Canada: standard and rapid.
 - The **standard** test is carried out by taking blood from a vein. The blood sample is sent to a lab and the results are available 2 to 4 weeks later.
 - Only one **rapid** test is currently available in Canada (*INSTI™ HIV-1/HIV-2 Rapid Antibody*). It is carried out using a blood droplet taken from the fingertip. The health care provider analyzes the sample at the clinic and the result is available within a few minutes. If the result is reactive, a blood sample is taken for a lab test to confirm the result. The lab result is available 2 to 4 weeks later.
- In some instances, infections can be detected after a few weeks but in other cases it can take as many as three months (window-period).
- If there is a risk you have been infected with HIV, it's not necessary to wait three months to get tested. Your health care provider will help to evaluate the situation and suggest which tests to carry out as well as the best timetable for any further testing that needs to be done.
- HIV testing, like any medical care, is always confidential. The information collected by health care providers to profile of your health is kept on file, but is never disclosed without your consent. Your health care provider needs this information order to give quality care that responds to each person's needs and circumstances.
- It is possible to offer the HIV test in a "non nominal" way. In such cases, personal information (e.g. health insurance number, name, address) is only kept on file at the clinic that does the test. Requests for analysis sent to the lab use an identifier (code) rather than your name.¹
- Anonymous HIV testing is also possible in certain cases. In Quebec, anonymous testing is only offered at CLSCs that have a SIDEPE testing service (*Services intégrés de dépistage et de prévention des ITSS*). You don't have to give your name and no health insurance card is needed. If the test result is positive or indeterminate, however, the person will be referred to the regular healthcare system. Medical follow up cannot be carried out anonymously.
- If a result is confirmed positive (except for anonymous testing), information collected by the care provider during the test (e.g. age, birthplace, sexual behaviour) is sent to the public health agency to track rates of infection, However, no information that could be used to identify you is used for these purposes.³
- HIV testing is an HIV prevention strategy because knowing your HIV status can reduce the risk of transmission. Since the symptoms that may appear following transmission are like the flu, an HIV infection can go unnoticed. However the amount of virus in the blood is at its highest levels and HIV most easily retransmitted at the beginning of an infection.
- A study done in Quebec showed that 50% of new HIV infection cases¹ were transmitted by people who themselves were infected for fewer than 6 months.⁴

Effectiveness

- Both the rapid and standard tests currently used in Quebec are very effective. Theoretically, if 3 months have passed since transmission, they will reliably detect any HIV infection in all individuals.

- Men who have sex with men should get tested every year regardless of their sexual practices or every 3 to 6 months if they report repeated risk factors, have repeated STIs, or have had more than 3 sexual partners in the past 12 months.¹

Accessibility

- In Quebec, HIV testing is free and covered by provincial health insurance (RAMQ). Some clinics charge fees of up to \$75 for a rapid test or fees related to transporting blood samples for standard testing.
- There are places where you can get tested without a health insurance card.
- HIV testing is offered in various locations including clinics, hospitals, and community organizations. A map of different testing clinics and services in Quebec can be found on the *Portail VIH/sida du Québec* web site: <http://pvsq.org/quebec-carte-des-sites-de-depistage-vih-et-des-itss/>.

Acceptability

- In the *Mobilise!* survey among men who have sex with men in Montreal, almost all (97%) of respondents knew about HIV testing as a risk reduction strategy and 85% knew about rapid HIV testing.⁶
- In cross-Canada surveys among men who have sex with men, 77% of respondents thought that regular testing was an effective strategy for reducing the risks of contracting HIV.⁷
- An analysis of 6 Canadian studies carried out between 2008 and 2012 found that 83% of MSM have been tested at least once. Between 58% and 78% had had their most recent test in the past 2 years.⁸
- Among participants who have had an HIV test at SPOT since July 2013 (a community site in Montreal's Gay Village), 14% had not been previously tested. Just over half (55%) had been tested in the past year and nearly all (96%) chose to have a rapid rather than standard test at SPOT.
- Advantages of HIV testing:
 - Informs you of your HIV status.⁹
 - Gives you the option to go on treatment if the result is positive.⁹⁻¹⁰
 - Helps you to consider which risk reduction strategies you can adopt.
 - Rapid testing makes it possible to have the test result in a few minutes.⁹⁻¹⁰
 - Free testing is available, depending on the location and type of test¹⁰
- Disadvantages of HIV testing:
 - Does not offer direct protection against HIV and other STIs⁹
 - Not always possible to know your current HIV status because of the window period⁹
 - Some clinics may require you to pay fees
- Obstacles to HIV testing:⁹⁻¹²
 - Not considering yourself at risk
 - Not having any symptoms or not recognizing them.
 - Feeling anxious about the test result
 - Worrying about the negative consequences that a positive result may have on your lifestyle, sexual practices, professional life and insurance
 - Feeling confident that your partners would tell you if they had engaged in risky practices or had received a positive HIV test result
 - Being concerned that that your privacy won't be respected if the result is positive.
 - Being afraid facing prejudices about gay men (e.g. that testing is only done on people who engage in risky behaviour)
 - Being afraid of facing discrimination against HIV positive people
 - Finding the waiting period to get test results to be too long
 - Having difficulty accessing the service (opening hours, accessibility problems, waiting period before getting an appointment)
 - Finding that certain testing clinics lack anonymity.

- Being afraid of or actually experiencing a negative attitude from a health care provider regarding your sexual behaviour or orientation
- Having a negative view of testing services
- Being socially or geographically disconnected from the gay community
- Worrying about criminalization for not disclosing HIV status
- Living too far away from where testing services are located.
- Fear of blood tests.

Cost-effectiveness

- In studies carried out in the United States and the United Kingdom, HIV testing was shown to be a cost-effective strategy. Increasing the annual number of tests decreases the number of new infections and improves quality of life and life expectancy.^{13,14}

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