

## *North Carolina Women's Hospital*

### **HIV Antibody Testing**

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. When a person is infected by HIV, their body produces antibodies (special proteins) to fight the infection. The HIV antibody test is a blood test that looks for these antibodies. The test can only tell if a person is infected. It cannot tell when they were infected or if they will develop AIDS. Most people begin to make antibodies within 2-8 weeks after they are infected, but some people may take longer. This means that the HIV antibody test may come back negative even after a person has been infected with HIV. Therefore, if the possible exposure was less than 3 months before the test, it may be necessary to test the person again before a negative result can be confirmed.

#### **Why is it important to be tested?**

North Carolina no longer allows anonymous HIV testing. Your test results will become part of your confidential medical record. Your health care provider will use this information to offer you appropriate counseling and to make recommendations for your medical care.

HIV testing is especially important for all pregnant women. Medications are available that will significantly reduce the risk of a mother passing HIV to her unborn child. The earlier that the medication is started the more effective it will be. The State of North Carolina requires all pregnant women to be tested during pregnancy. If you are planning to have children, consider being tested for HIV before becoming pregnant.

#### **What does a positive test result mean?**

A positive test result means that your body has produced antibodies as a result of being infected with HIV. If you are infected with HIV, you can pass the virus on to others even if you look and feel well. Testing positive for HIV antibodies does **NOT** mean that you have AIDS. However, you could develop AIDS in the future.

#### **What should I do if I test positive?**

If you test positive, your test result will be reported to the local and state health department. A counselor may meet with you and help you tell your sex and needle-sharing partners about their possible exposure to HIV. When the counselor talks with your partners, information about you, such as your name, will be kept strictly confidential. If you are married and test positive for HIV, your spouse will be notified and counseled, either by your physician or by the health department.

It is also important for you to inform your health care providers of your positive test results, as well as to make a physician appointment as soon as possible. There are tests that can be done to tell if HIV has begun to damage your immune system (your body's ability to fight off other infections). If damage has occurred, special treatments may prevent or slow down the development of AIDS. People infected with HIV have a better chance of living longer when they are treated early on. Also, you should have a TB (Tuberculosis) test and be checked for

other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Untreated illnesses can cause serious health problems.

North Carolina law requires people who test positive to take the following steps to prevent the spread of HIV:

- Do tell persons you have had sex and/or shared needles with in the past year about your infection. If you know when you became infected, then all partners since the date of infection must be told. Failing to do so could lead to infection of others.
- Do tell new sex partners about your HIV infection.
- Do not have sex unless latex condoms are used.
- Do not share needles or syringes (works).
- Do not give or sell blood, plasma, platelets, other blood products, semen, ova, tissues, organs, or breast milk

### **What does a negative test result mean?**

A negative test result means that antibodies have not been found in your blood. There are two possible reasons for this:

1. You have not been infected with the virus; OR
2. You have been infected with the virus but have not yet produced antibodies.

It is important to keep in mind that a negative test result DOES NOT mean that you have not been infected with HIV. It also does not mean that you will not be infected with HIV in the future.

### **How can I protect myself against HIV?**

- Avoid drug use. If you are using drugs, seek help from a drug treatment program
- Needles should never be shared.
- Do not have sex. If you are sexually active, it is safest to have only one partner. The more partners you have, the greater the chance that you will come into contact with someone who is infected.
- Sexually active people should always use:
  - latex condoms to prevent blood, semen, and vaginal fluids from getting into your body
  - latex condoms with non-oxynol-9 during vaginal and anal sex
  - non-lubricated latex condoms or a dental dam during oral sex
  - water-based lubricants during sex (oil-based lubricants can weaken latex and cause the condom to break)
  - a spermicidal lubricant containing non-oxynol-9 to provide added protection

*Approved by NC Women's Hospital Patient Education Steering Committee, January 2010.*