

Getting Tested

What is the testing process at Hep-C ALERT like?

When you meet with your test counselor, he/she will collect some information about you such as your race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual and substance use activity, and whether you have ever had an HIV or VH test before. The counselor will also offer advice about reducing your risk.

Before the test, the counselor will talk to you about the testing process, answer your questions, and address any other concerns you have. You will sign a consent form and schedule a follow-up appointment to get your test result.

A sample of your blood (if testing for HIV and VH together) or oral fluid (if testing for HIV only) will be collected and sent to an outside laboratory for testing.

Is the test confidential or anonymous?

HIV and VH testing at Hep-C ALERT is confidential, meaning your name will be linked with the test results. Your records will be kept secret from everyone except specific agency personnel and the health department. Anonymous HIV testing is available at selected agencies in Miami-Dade. Your counselor will be happy to give you a referral if this is what you prefer.

When and where can I get tested?

You can drop-in without an appointment at Hep-C ALERT's office and will be seen in order of arrival. There is normally no waiting. You can also call 305-893-7992 x165 anytime day or night to hear a recording of when outreach staff will be in your Northeast Miami neighborhood to do testing. Office hours are:

Monday - Thursday: 12:00pm to 8:00pm

Friday: 9:30am to 5:00pm

How do I get my test results?

The purpose of getting tested is to know your status. Results are usually available 2 weeks after your test date. Do not assume that "no news is good news." It is very important that you return to the office or meet with outreach staff to get your HIV and/or VH test results. At your return appointment, your counselor will give you your test results and answer questions. If your results are positive, you will receive referrals for care and other services you may need. If your results are negative, you and your counselor can discuss ways to protect yourself in the future.



Hep-C ALERT

FROM THE STREETS TO THE SPECIALIST

Hepatitis & HIV Counseling, Testing and Referral

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Materials adapted from Center for HIV Information / HIV InSite:

Should I get tested for HIV? Sept. 2004. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/hiv?page=basics-00-17>

What happens when you get tested for HIV? Sept. 2004. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/hiv?page=basics-00-18>

Should I Get Tested for HIV and Hepatitis?

There is no easy answer to this question. Finding out your HIV and Viral Hepatitis (VH) test results will let you know if you need to get treatment. Also, testing and counseling can be a good way to educate yourself about HIV and VH and your own risk.

Counseling involves talking with a trained Hep-C ALERT test counselor before and after taking the test. You can ask questions, talk about your risk of getting infected, and raise any concerns or fears about testing you may have. You can talk to counselor without committing to taking the test. Here are some questions to consider regarding testing:

1) Do you have reason to think you might be infected?

- Have you ever shared needles or other equipment to inject drugs or pierce the skin?
- Have you ever received a blood transfusion? (Since 1992 the risk is very low in the United States, but can vary in other countries)
- Have you ever had "unprotected" sex (sex without a condom or other latex barrier)--oral, vaginal, or anal?
- Have you ever had sex with someone who was an IV drug user or had HIV or VH?
- Have you ever had a sexually transmitted disease (STD) such as herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea or trichomoniasis?
- Have you ever been sexually assaulted (raped, forced or talked into having sex when you didn't want to)?
- Have you ever passed out or forgotten what happened after you were drinking or getting high?
- Have you ever been told you have had a hepatitis infection in the past or had abnormal liver blood tests?
- Did your mother have HIV or VH when you were born?

2) Do you need permission from a parent or guardian to be tested?

In Florida, HIV testing can be provided to any person 13 years and above without parental consent. VH testing cannot be provided to minors without parental consent.

3) What will you do with the test results?

If you test positive, how do you think your life will change? If you test negative, what will you do differently? Will you have support from friends or family when you find out your results?

What Happens When I Get Tested?

What is the test looking for?

The HIV and VH tests are designed to detect antibodies to the virus in your blood (or with HIV, in the saliva.) Antibodies are "fighter cells" produced by your body when you have an infection. If you are infected with HIV or VH, your body makes very specific antibodies to fight the infection. If you have antibodies, then you have been infected with the HIV and/or one of the VH viruses.

What is a window period?

The window period is the time it takes for your body to produce antibodies after you have been exposed to HIV and/or VH. In more than 99% of people, this period is between 2 and 12 weeks. In a very small number of people, the process takes up to 6 months.

The window period causes a lot of confusion. Here's an example: Let's say someone had unprotected sex on Saturday night. On Monday, he goes to get an HIV or VH test. The test will almost certainly come back negative, even if he was infected with HIV on Saturday night, because his body has not yet had a chance to make antibodies. Even if he went for a test 1 or 2 months later, he might still get a negative result even if he had been infected on that Saturday night; again, the reason is because he has not yet produced antibodies, which are what the HIV and/or VH test is looking for.

If you are worried about something that happened that may have exposed you to HIV or VH, you naturally will want to get tested as soon as possible. A good strategy would be to go back for a test 3 months after your possible exposure; the result you get after 3 months will be 99% certain. However, if you think you may have been exposed and are having symptoms of a viral infection, see a doctor right away. The doctor may be able to perform a different kind of test that can detect actual virus (versus the antibodies to the virus) in the blood. If you think you may have been exposed recently (regardless of whether you have symptoms), talk to a counselor or health care provider about when you should be tested.