

# THIVK<sup>®</sup>

TEST. TAKE CONTROL.

What's new for gay men about HIV tests?



CHAPS

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# Who has HIV without knowing?

## "If a guy had HIV, he'd tell me"

Between 8,000 and 10,000 gay men in the UK have HIV without knowing. Most think they're still HIV negative. 1 in 4 gay men with HIV don't realise they have it. In some big city gay scenes nearly half of us with HIV may not know we have it.\* This means lots of men with HIV can't tell people ... even if they wanted to.

## "I tested negative in the past, so must still be OK"

Ever thought you could have HIV already? And be giving it to others? An old negative result is worth little if you've had unprotected anal sex since. Lots of us have tested negative in the past but got HIV since our last test without realising. That's why a test at least once a year is recommended.

\*source: Health Protection Agency, 2008 and J Dodds *A tale of three cities*, 2007.



# Boyfriends not using condoms

Some couples carry on using condoms to protect each other from any risk, but others want to stop using them. The safest way to do this is to use HIV testing.

## Here's a step-by-step guide.

- 1 Talk to each other about whether you both feel you can deal with the honesty and trust needed to make this work.
- 2 Talk about how you feel about testing and what you'd do if one of you tests positive.
- 3 It's important to have an agreement about whether you'll only have sex with each other, or is sex with others allowed? If so, what kind of sex (in terms of HIV risk) is OK?
- 4 Whatever agreement you decide on, what happens if one of you breaks it? This could end in disaster if either of you feel you can't be honest and tell the other. That risks one of you getting HIV from outside the relationship and giving it to your partner.
- 5 Before abandoning condoms both of you need to test, preferably together, so you know that the other has tested and what the result was.
- 6 If you both get negative tests, stick with condoms for another three months, then test again. This makes totally sure the first negative results were accurate (that the first test didn't miss a recent infection).
- 7 Are your second tests both negative? Then you can give up condoms knowing you've taken steps to make it as safe as possible.
- 8 Keep communicating. If one of you breaks the agreement or anything happens that might bring HIV into your relationship, tell the other straight away. Go back to condoms until a test can show everything's OK.

# Today's HIV treatments

## "I can wait until I get ill before I test"

Avoiding testing won't make HIV go away. It can make things far worse. All the time someone stays untested and untreated the virus is silently attacking their body – until the day comes when they can fall dangerously ill. But test soon enough and treatments can keep them healthy.

Life is much less complicated if you don't get HIV. And it still kills gay men (especially if they don't test soon enough). But things now look good for people who get HIV so long as they start treatment before the virus damages their immune system too badly. If they do, doctors are confident they can live as long as HIV negative people. HIV drugs are much better than in the past; easier to take and with far fewer side effects. Tests show if someone needs treatment. They might not need it for a long time.

Testing positive is no longer a 'death sentence'. The biggest risk of serious illness and death comes from not testing soon enough. Testing positive can save your life. And add years to it.



# What is 'seroconversion illness'?

**"I got ill a few weeks after unsafe sex.  
Was it serious?"**

From the day someone picks up HIV they're very infectious. If they have unprotected sex there's a very high chance they'll pass on HIV. But it takes a few weeks for signs of infection to show. One sign is when your body makes 'antibodies' to HIV in your blood and it goes from testing HIV negative to testing positive. This is called 'seroconversion'. It happens within 6 weeks or so of getting HIV. During 'seroconversion' most people get an illness that lasts a week or two. **The most common signs are fever and flu-like aches, sore throat and rash on the body.**

These can also be symptoms of a less serious infection, eg, glandular fever. So if you get these, don't assume you must now have HIV. The more of these symptoms you get, the stronger the chance HIV is the cause. But if you've not had anal sex without a condom in the previous six weeks it's not likely to be HIV.

'Seroconversion illness' can make you so ill that you need to see a doctor or go to hospital ... or it can be mild and dismissed as a bit of flu. A runny or blocked nose is not a symptom of 'seroconversion illness'. If yours is blocked or runny, it's likely all you have is a cold or flu.

But remember: some people get no symptoms when they first pick up HIV. So if nothing happens in the weeks after fucking without a condom don't think you're in the clear. An HIV test will tell you for sure.

# What a test can do for you

## Certainty

Knowing your HIV status for sure is the best foundation for decisions about sex, the future or using condoms. How would you feel if, without realising, you gave HIV to someone you care about?

## Peace of mind

It's good to know where you stand. Whatever your result, knowing can be a huge relief. Lots of people feel sure they have HIV... but test negative. Test negative and you can make a fresh start and an extra effort to stay safe.

## The best chance of good health

If you test positive, treatments are very good but work best if started sooner, not later. Leave testing until you get ill and the drugs might not work very well, risking serious illness, even death.

## Be in control

Knowing you have HIV puts you in charge. You can take steps to protect others, make plans and changes – a new beginning. Get control over HIV with the help of doctors and treatment. Keep your life as it is. Don't let illness spoil it.

It's easier to deal with a positive result when you're healthy, not sick. You're in control of who you tell and when, instead of telling family and friends you have HIV from a hospital bed.

# Tests can now give results in 20 minutes.

New 'rapid' HIV tests give results while you wait, and only need a pin prick of blood from your finger. These quicker tests are available in most parts of the country, eg, Terrence Higgins Trust *Fastest* centres. Use the clinic finder at [www.thinkHIV.co.uk](http://www.thinkHIV.co.uk) or call THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200 to find a rapid testing service near you.

# You no longer need to wait 3 months between taking a risk and testing.

Clinics will be happy to test you at any time. HIV tests now detect infections much quicker, just a few weeks after a risk. If you've taken a risk in the last month or so, clinic staff will advise you whether you need to take a second test a few weeks after your first. This is to be sure the first negative test didn't miss a recent infection.

# Gay men are recommended to test at least once a year.

Testing once isn't enough. Clinics will be glad to test you whenever you've taken a risk. Gay men are now recommended to test at least every 12 months; more often if you've fucked without a condom or had possible 'seroconversion illness' symptoms. The sooner you test the better.

## Useful websites:

**[www.thinkHIV.co.uk](http://www.thinkHIV.co.uk)**

all you need to know about HIV tests.

**[www.betterclinics.co.uk](http://www.betterclinics.co.uk)**

information about using sexual health clinics.

**[www.tht.org.uk/whatnext](http://www.tht.org.uk/whatnext)**

information and support for gay men  
who've recently tested HIV positive.

**[www.chapsonline.org.uk/infections](http://www.chapsonline.org.uk/infections)**

more about sexually transmitted infections  
and using clinics.



## The HIV and sexual health charity for life

**Website:** [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk) **THT Direct:** 0845 12 21 200

**Registered office:** 314–320 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP

**Tel:** 020 7812 1600 **Email:** [info@tht.org.uk](mailto:info@tht.org.uk)

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Design **Felton Communication** 020 7405 0900 Ref: 11452



# BETTER CLINICS. BETTER GO.

Good news about clinics. Did you know these facts about sexual health clinics?



## 1. HUGE SATISFACTION

9 out of 10 gay men who've used a clinic would recommend it.

They feel they're listened to, treated with respect, can talk honestly and the staff know what they're doing.\*  
\*Based on replies of over 16,000 men questioned in the 2005 Gay Men's Sex Survey

## 2. COME AGAIN AND AGAIN

You don't have to have symptoms to use clinics.

Symptoms of an infection don't always show. That's why routine check-ups are recommended. Some clinics recommend one every three months if you have lots of partners (less often with fewer partners); but at least once a year.

## 3. COME ON YOUR OWN

You don't need your doctor to send you to a clinic.

They don't even need to know you've been to one. But you can bring a friend with you for support.

## 4. FAST MOVER

Making an appointment usually means less waiting in the clinic.

You'll wait the longest if you use a 'walk in' clinic (no appointment needed). A visit can take a few hours. If you have symptoms, tell the clinic. It should mean you get an appointment quicker. Clinics should see you within 48 hours of you contacting them.

## 5. HOME AND AWAY

You can use any clinic, not just the nearest one.

You don't have to use the local clinic if you're worried about being seen. If you're on holiday in the UK you can use a clinic where you're staying: no need to wait until you get home.

## 6. ANONYMOUS MEET

Clinics have to keep your details confidential by law.

They aren't shared with anyone, including your family doctor, without your permission. Only if you agree can your test results be shared with others like your family, partner, etc. There's no 'official' list of people with HIV kept by the authorities.



## 7. FREE AND EASY

Tests and treatments at sexual health clinics are free for everyone – no matter where in the world you come from or how long you've been in Britain.

## 8. QUICK RELIEF

Using alternatives to clinics can mean you get checked quicker.

Many doctors' surgeries now check for sexually transmitted infections. Ask if yours does. Sexual health/HIV organisations sometimes do it too, in their offices or in gay saunas, bars, clubs, etc. Call your nearest one to find out.

## 9. PIECE OF PISS

Many clinics now test for infections by using a sample of your urine, without the need for swabs.

If you have a choice of clinics, you could ring around to see which test this way. If you do have a swab from your penis, it's done with a small cotton bud or very thin plastic stick. Any discomfort lasts only a second. The old story about an 'umbrella' or hook-type of instrument that goes down your penis is a myth based on something used 50 years ago but not now.

For more on what happens when you visit a sexual health clinic, including what tests are like, check out this website [www.betterclinics.co.uk](http://www.betterclinics.co.uk)

Or call THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200 (weekdays 10am-10pm, weekends midday until 6pm)

### Information and support

Terrence Higgins Trust has centres in Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, London, Wales and other parts of the country. For more information, visit [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)

The following organisations can also help you with questions about HIV, testing, clinics, risks you may have taken, etc.



**Leicester** TRADE Sexual Health  
[www.tradesexualhealth.com](http://www.tradesexualhealth.com)  
0116 254 1747

**Liverpool** Armistead Project  
[www.armisteadcentre.co.uk](http://www.armisteadcentre.co.uk)  
0870 990 8996

**London** GMFA  
[www.gmfa.org.uk](http://www.gmfa.org.uk)  
020 7738 6872

**Manchester** Lesbian & Gay Foundation  
[www.lgf.org.uk](http://www.lgf.org.uk)  
0845 3 30 30 30

**Plymouth** Eddystone Trust  
[www.eddystone.org.uk](http://www.eddystone.org.uk)  
01752 257077

**Sheffield** Centre for HIV & Sexual Health  
[www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk](http://www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk)  
0114 226 1900

**Yorkshire** Yorkshire MESMAC  
[www.mesmac.co.uk](http://www.mesmac.co.uk)  
0113 244 4209

[www.betterclinics.co.uk](http://www.betterclinics.co.uk)