

## HIV Testing Day is June 27: Here's what you should know

Written by Melody Mendiola  
Thursday, 03 June 2010 14:43

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HIV and AIDS have disproportionately affected the African American population. Of the estimated one million people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S. today, roughly half are Black. Yet, as a racial group, African Americans represent just 13 percent of the population. The lifetime risk of becoming infected with HIV is 1 in 16 for Black males, 1 in 30 for Black females in the U.S., a far greater risk than for white males (1 in 104) and white females (1 in 588).

On June 27th, the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA) and local organizations like the Positive Care Center at Hennepin County Medical Center, will sponsor National HIV Testing Day to promote early diagnosis and HIV testing. The effort further raises awareness for the health risks and challenges associated with HIV and AIDS.

Each year, more than 1,100 Minnesotans receive expert assessment and treatment of HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis C, HPV and other conditions at the Positive Care Center at Hennepin County Medical Center. It is one of the largest clinical and research centers in the Midwest, staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals who provide comprehensive health and psychosocial services to those infected with HIV. The Positive Care Center also serves as a community and family resource to further contribute to the advancement of HIV-related knowledge.

In observance of HIV Testing Day, here are a few frequently asked questions and critical reminders for protecting against HIV.

### What is HIV?

**HIV** stands for **H**uman **I**mmunodeficiency **V**irus, which is the germ that can enter the body and eventually cause **AIDS (A**cquired **I**mmune **D**eficiency **Sy**ndrome). HIV attacks the immune system, killing cells of the body that protect against disease.

In advanced stages, a person with HIV may come down with serious diseases, such as a rare kind of pneumonia or some types of cancers. When a person with HIV has one of these diseases, the diagnosis is AIDS.

Even if a person with HIV doesn't look or feel sick, he or she can pass the virus to other people by having unprotected sex or sharing needles for injecting drugs. Pregnant women can also pass HIV to their babies before they are born.

### How is HIV spread?

These are the ways of getting HIV:

- **Unprotected sex:** You can get HIV by having sex with a person who has HIV. This includes vaginal, oral or anal sex. It can be with someone of the opposite sex or the same sex.
- **Sharing needles:** You also can get HIV by sharing infected needles for drug use, body

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piercing or tattooing.

- **Blood transfusions before 1985.** In rare instances, there have been HIV cases traced to blood transfusions before 1985.
- **Vertical transmission:** A pregnant woman with HIV can pass the infection to the baby, as the baby is exposed to mom's blood during the birthing process. HIV can also be passed through breastfeeding. Fortunately, with good medical care during pregnancy, there is a lot that we can do to prevent this from happening, so it is quite rare now.

There are common myths associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. You cannot get HIV from:

- Hugging, kissing or shaking hands with a person who has HIV.
- Toilet seats, doorknobs, tables or dishes.
- Insect bites.

### What are the symptoms of HIV?

During the initial stages of HIV, symptoms may include:

- Stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Enlarged lymph nodes in the neck, armpits and groin
- Fever
- Headache
- Muscle aches and joint pain
- Skin rash
- Sore throat
- Weight loss
- Fatigue

These initial symptoms can range from mild to severe. It often can feel like a flu-like illness. These symptoms usually disappear within a couple weeks. Nonetheless, the HIV virus can continue to multiply, further affecting the immune system's ability to fight the disease.

In more advanced, chronic stages of HIV, several of the following symptoms are present:

- Severe fatigue
- Diarrhea or bowel changes
- Loss of appetite or severe weight loss
- Fever
- Dry cough or shortness of breath
- Night sweats
- Nail changes
- Swollen lymph nodes in the neck, armpits and groin
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating or personality changes
- Pain when swallowing

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- Tingling, numbness or weakness in the limbs
- Repeated outbreaks of cold sores or genital herpes
- Mouth sores or a yeast infection in the mouth (thrush)
- More than three yeast infections in a year (when not related to antibiotics)
- Abnormal pap test

### **Should I be tested for HIV?**

You should consider having a blood test for HIV if you have:

- Had vaginal, anal or oral sex without a condom
- Shared needles for drugs, piercing or tattoos
- Had a blood transfusion before 1985

### **Where can I go to be tested for HIV?**

Hennepin County Medical Center's Positive Care Center provides comprehensive HIV testing and counseling. Through Ryan White funding, the Center extends high-quality care to all HIV-infected patients, regardless of their financial status or ability to pay. Further, testing of partners is available at no charge through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Health. The Direct Care Clinic at Hennepin County Medical Center offers full service STD and HIV testing, and offers pre- and post-test counseling. You can also talk with your primary care provider to decide if you should be tested.

To schedule an appointment at the Positive Care Center, please call 612-873-2700.

*Melody Mendiola, MD, is a board-certified general internal medicine doctor and medical director of Hennepin Care North, a clinic of Hennepin County Medical Center, located in Brooklyn Center, MN. Dr. Mendiola is accepting new patients at Hennepin Care North. To schedule an appointment, call (612) 873-8800.*