

# HIV TESTING FOR WOMEN DURING PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

All women who are pregnant should be offered an HIV antibody test by their health care provider (doctor, midwife, nurse practitioner) as part of their routine prenatal care. **HIV testing is not part of the regular blood tests taken during pregnancy.**

## What is HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. A person can get HIV by having unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex with a person who is infected. Sharing needles and syringes infected with HIV can also pass HIV from one person to another.

Even if a woman has only had one sex partner, she might have HIV and not know it. Most people with HIV have no symptoms for years. HIV is found in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk. Most women do not see themselves as being at risk for HIV.

## Women who are at risk for HIV

- Any woman who has had unprotected sex.
- Women from countries where the rate of HIV is high. In these countries, most women with HIV get it through unprotected sex with men.
- Women who have had unprotected sex with needle users or who have shared syringes.
- Any woman who has received a blood transfusion or blood product before 1985 in Canada and/or USA.

## Why take the test?

For a pregnant woman, knowing the test results will help her make the best decision about her own health as well as her baby's health. About 25 percent of pregnant women infected with HIV will pass the virus to their babies during pregnancy, labour and delivery or through breastfeeding. Taking medication for HIV may reduce passing the virus to the baby to 2 percent or lower.

## HIV testing is not a part of routine pregnancy tests

If you are not asked about having an HIV test, it is important for you to talk about it with your health care provider.

**Your health care provider is supposed to give you information and counselling before and after the test.**

They need to explain:

- Reasons why they think you should take the test
- The advantages and disadvantages of taking the test
- The advantages and disadvantages of taking medication if you have HIV

**Testing is voluntary. You must give your consent to be tested.**

## When can the test be done?

You can be tested for HIV at any time, whether you are already pregnant or not. If you are pregnant, your health care provider can order an HIV test at the same time as other routine blood tests. It takes about two weeks for the test results to get back to you.

## What if I don't want anyone to know I am being tested?

Doctors, midwives and health units offer confidential testing. However, all positive HIV test results will be sent to Toronto Public Health. This information remains confidential.

There are also **anonymous** test sites. They do not ask your name or immigration status. These places give free testing without a health card and provide information and counselling. With anonymous testing, **no one will know the results unless you choose to tell them.**

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## What if my test is negative?

If it has been three months since you had unprotected sex or shared a needle, and your test is negative, that means you don't have HIV.

HIV tests are most accurate three months after you have had unprotected sex or shared a needle. If you are tested before three months and have a negative result, your test results may not be accurate. You may need to be tested again.

## What if my test is positive during my pregnancy?

A positive test means you have HIV. Taking good care of yourself can help you live with HIV for many years. You can get support and information to stay healthy from your health care provider.

You can choose to:

- Continue with your pregnancy without medication
- Take medication that can help reduce the chance of passing HIV to your baby from 25 percent to 2 percent or lower. It is important to discuss the side effects and safety of these medications with your health care provider
- Have an abortion
- Discuss your delivery options and breastfeeding plan with your health care provider

In Canada, breastfeeding by HIV positive women is not usually recommended.

## I'm breastfeeding, should I still be tested?

If you are breastfeeding and you do not know if you have HIV, talk to a health care provider. **Continue to breastfeed until you have your test results.**

If you find out that you are HIV positive, you and your health care provider need to discuss your concerns and whether or not you should continue breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding and formula feeding **at the same time** may increase the risk of passing HIV to your baby if you are HIV positive.

## Should my partner get tested?

The best time to be tested for HIV is before a couple plans a pregnancy. If you and your partner are planning a pregnancy, are pregnant or have a baby and are breastfeeding this is a good time for **both of you** to consider testing.

If possible, discuss the facts about HIV testing with your partner. If discussing this makes you feel unsafe, you can talk to a Public Health Nurse or health care provider.

## For more information please call



### AIDS and Sexual Health InfoLine 1-800-668-2437

Free confidential information about HIV/AIDS, HIV testing and anonymous test sites, safer sex and drug use.

### Toronto Health Connection Toronto Public Health 416-338-7600

### Motherisk HIV HealthLine 1-888-246-5840

### HIV and AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO) 416-340-7790 Legal Immigration Issues

Your Health Care Provider

Your Family Doctor