

What's New in HIV Counselling and Testing?

More Anonymous Test Sites

The government of Ontario has recently authorized 24 more sites to provide anonymous testing, bringing the total to 50, and increased the availability of anonymous HIV testing in many parts of the province. Physicians who do not have the time or experience to do HIV testing can refer clients to a public health sexual health clinic or to an anonymous testing program.

Contact the AIDS Hotline for locations and phone numbers of anonymous test sites at 416-392-2437 or 1-800-668-2437; French line: 1-800-267-7432.

Where are Ontario's Anonymous HIV Test Sites?

22 in public health units.

16 in community health centres.

4 in midwifery practices (only for use by their clients).

3 in sexual health centres.

5 in other locations – a hospital, a youth agency, two Aboriginal agencies and a family health team.

More Flexible Tests

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is making free point-of-care HIV tests available to anonymous test sites, public health sexual health clinics and community health centres that choose to offer this type of testing. With point-of-care testing, people who are negative will know within a few minutes of being tested. People who test reactive on a point-of-care test must have a confirmatory test done using standard laboratory testing, and will have to wait up to two weeks to obtain their results. (Note: time to receive test

results varies across the province.) In addition, the public health laboratory now routinely performs p24 antigen tests on any test sample where the requisition form indicates the person is in the window period, is symptomatic AND has had a high risk exposure.

More Knowledge about Risks

We now know that

- Younger women (i.e., under age 18) are at greater risk of acquiring HIV than older women because the cells of the cervix do not fully develop until age 18.
- The health of the mucosal membrane is affected by the presence of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), female hormone levels, lack of lubrication and the use of irritating substances.
- A low viral load reduces but does not eliminate the risk of HIV transmission. Antiviral medications do not always reach high enough levels to suppress HIV in the genital tract. The risk increases if the person has another sexually transmitted infection.
- There is a risk of HIV transmission from sharing other drug equipment (besides needles), such as cookers, filters, water, alcohol swabs, tourniquets, crack pipes and glass stems.

Greater Understanding of Social Determinants/Risks

The ability of people to negotiate and practise safer sex and drug use is affected by the social determinants of health, such as poverty, housing, power imbalances in relationships, drug or alcohol use and stigma. The issues that people face often vary with age, sexual orientation, culture and race.

Effective prevention counselling must address all these issues. (See Appendix 2 for a brief discussion of population specific issues.)

The Importance of Other STIs and Hepatitis C Testing

A significant proportion of people who are at risk of HIV are also at risk of other STIs and hepatitis C. Anyone who presents for HIV testing should also be counselled and assessed for risks of other STIs and hepatitis C, and offered testing.

The Time Required for HIV Testing

HIV pre-test counselling can be done in 15 to 20 minutes; however, the time will vary depending on the client's level of knowledge and other needs.

Legal Requirement to Disclose to Future Partners

Over the past few years, a number of people with HIV have been convicted on criminal charges for engaging in sexual activities that pose a significant risk of transmitting HIV without informing their partners of their HIV status. People who test positive for HIV must now be advised to tell partners that they have HIV before they engage in any activity that poses a significant risk, such as unprotected vaginal or anal sex - otherwise, the partner's consent to have sex is not valid and the person with HIV could be charged. The law is not yet completely clear on other activities that pose a significant risk. For more information on the legal requirement to disclose HIV status to future partners, contact HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic (Ontario) (HALCO): 416-340-7790; 1-888-705-8889; www.halco.org.

Help with Language Issues

The AIDS Hotline provides information in 18 languages and has staff who can provide translation and interpretation services when counsellors do not speak the same language as clients. They are very familiar with HIV testing issues and are an excellent resource. (AIDS Hotline numbers: 416-392-2437 or 1-800-668-2437; French line: 1-800-267-7432.)

In January 2008, the AIDS Hotline provided services in the following languages:

Armenian
Bengali
Cantonese
English
Filipino
French
Hakka
Hindi
Mandarin
Portuguese
Russian
Sinhalese
Spanish
Swahili
Taiwanese
Tamil
Urdu
Vietnamese

Help with Partner Notification

The AIDS Bureau is working with the field to develop more detailed guidelines for partner notification that will help counsellors address difficult issues.

Other Checklists and Tools

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's *Guidelines for HIV Counselling and Testing* includes a number of tools, such as a pre-test counselling checklist, safer sex guidelines at a glance, counselling tips and advice on providing a positive test result.

Learn more about testing at,
SayYesToKnowing.ca