

HIV Antibody Testing

at the Berkeley Free Clinic Frequently Asked Questions

Where can I get tested for HIV?

- The Berkeley Free Clinic offers free, anonymous testing every Sunday between 5 and 7 pm on a first-come first-serve basis. We are located at 2339 Durant Ave. near Dana St. in Berkeley.
- On Saturday afternoons we offer free, anonymous drop-in testing for **women only** from 12 noon to 2 pm.
- For other test sites in Northern California call (800) FOR AIDS.

What does "anonymous" testing mean?

- There are two kinds of HIV testing: anonymous and confidential. All HIV testing at the Berkeley Free Clinic is anonymous. This means that no names, addresses, phone numbers are taken. Clients are identified by a code number and given a receipt after the blood draw which must be brought back in person one week later to get the test result.
- We cannot give your results to anyone else, even at your request.
- If you need a document with your HIV status written on it (for example for travel or insurance coverage) you should go to a clinic that provides confidential testing. An anonymous test result will not have your name on it, so it is useless as a verification of your status to a third party. Call (800) FOR AIDS to find a confidential test site near you. Some people like to get an anonymous test before getting a confidential test so that they aren't surprised by their result. California law offers protection from unwarranted requests for your HIV antibody status.

by Nicolas Sheon and other HPS volunteers

How long does it take to get the results?

- One week. Results are available the Sunday following your test between 4 and 7pm. You must bring your receipt in person to receive your result. Results are kept for 60 days. To get a result after 60 days, you will have to retest.

How long will I have to wait to get tested?

- When you arrive you will be given a number and asked to wait until a counselor can see you. Sometimes there is a wait of as much as 60 minutes, but when your turn comes, we'll spend as much time as you need to address your concerns and answer all your questions.
- The whole process (test counseling and blood draw) takes an average of 25-35 minutes.
- Priority is given to results. When you return, you will be seen relatively quickly.

How much blood is needed for the test?

- Only a small tube of blood. We use new needles for each client. If you're a fainter or are nervous about blood draws, let us know ahead of time so we can take special care of you.

Do I have to tell my life story to the counselor in order to get tested?

- No, but state law requires that all HIV tests be accompanied by test counseling. The counselors at the Berkeley Free Clinic are all volunteers, trained to talk about HIV. This means we really enjoy talking about sex, relationships, and how to make safer sex work for you. We want to make sure you understand the basics of HIV transmission, how to avoid infection, how the test works, etc. We will also fill out an anonymous risk

questionnaire which helps the state identify unmet needs and changing patterns in the epidemic. You may decline to answer any questions.

- The counselor is there to answer your questions and discuss your concerns. Your counselor can suggest new options to help you enjoy sex with less worry about HIV and STDs. If your having problems using condoms we have lots of suggestions and free condoms and lube to take with you.
- If you have been tested many times and feel that you know all there is to know about testing and HIV, please be patient with us. We still have to cover some basic information with you before we can give you the test.

Can I also get tested for other Sexually Transmitted Diseases?

- Men can get STD screenings and treatment on Sundays between 5-7 pm. The Berkeley Free Clinic Gay Men's Health Collective provides free drop in STD testing to **all men**, (straight, bi, or gay) on Sunday evenings at the same time as the HIV test Clinic. Men can get both confidential testing for STD on Sundays.
- **Women with symptoms** can get STD screenings and treatments on weekday evenings and on Saturday mornings. This service is by appointment only. Call (510) 548-4811 or (800) 6-CLINIC at 5:45 pm to schedule an appointment for that evening or at 9AM on Saturday for a same day appointment. Ask the person at the front desk for a women's referral sheet.

When should I get tested?

- You should get tested whenever you feel it is necessary. If you are concerned about a particular partner or risk, try to wait at least 6 months after the incident before getting tested.
- Why 6 months? The HIV test is a test for antibodies to the virus and not for the virus itself. Antibodies are substances produced by the body to fight a specific invading organism. It takes your body anywhere from two weeks to six months to produce the antibodies once you've been infected by HIV. This period is called the **window period**. This means that if you are concerned about a specific risk incident, it will take up to six months for the test to be conclusive. Another way to look at it is that the test will tell you about your status six months ago and before. The window period is usually considered

to be six months long, however, most people develop the antibodies within the first three months after infection. Because a few cases take longer, we use a six month window period just to be sure.

- People get tested for lots of reasons. It's very important to be aware of **your** reasons for testing, some of which may not be obvious. Some people test because of anxieties or lack of trust in their relationships, low self-esteem, trouble maintaining boundaries with partners, or because they can't stop doing something that puts them at risk. If any of these are concerns for you, your test counselor will be glad to talk about this and can also suggest some other referrals.

How accurate is the HIV test?

- The test is extremely accurate. The HIV test actually involves several separate testing methods. The blood is sent to a state certified laboratory and first tested with the **ELISA test (Enzyme-Linked ImmunoSorbant Assay)**. The ELISA test determines if HIV antibodies are present in a person's blood.
- The ELISA test is very sensitive. It will be react even if there are only one or two antibodies in the blood sample. If the first ELISA test does not react with the blood, no more testing is performed on the sample and the test result is nonreactive, or negative.
- If the ELISA test is reactive, or positive, it is repeated. If the second ELISA test is also positive, it must be confirmed by another testing method called the **Western Blot test** before it can be declared a positive HIV antibody test. The Western Blot reacts only to specific HIV antibodies. Using the two tests together means that the HIV antibody test is extremely accurate.

For More Information

- Ask the Swithboard worker at the front desk for more information about making appointments and other referrals.
- Visit our HIV Prevention web site at www.managingdesire.org
- Call the San Francisco AIDS Hotline (800) FOR AIDS or the HIV Nightline (800) 273-AIDS.