



HIV: Why get tested?

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About a quarter of people infected with HIV don't know it. That means of the 58,000 infected, about 15,000

are in for quite a surprise... as are their partners. Could you be among them?

Because specific symptoms may not appear for a very long time (years, even), many people do not realize they are HIV positive. When first infected, they may have had flu-like symptoms —some will have no symptoms at all— but these are not uncommon so likely to be missed as clues.

All this leads a person to wonder if they should get tested. The Canadian Health Network offers its top reasons to get tested in its report “Stop the Rise in HIV: Top reasons to get tested.” There are four ‘top reasons’ for testing (sorry—we wanted ten reasons, too).

First, get tested if you are sexually active. Some sexual activities have no risk, while others have a high risk. Unprotected sex where there is an exchange of bodily fluids or blood should always be considered a risk. Next, if you have injected drugs because sharing a needle puts you at risk. If the other person's blood is HIV-infected, any remaining on a needle can be transferred to you. Using alcohol or recreational drugs can lead people to take risks they may not otherwise take if not intoxicated. An example might be to have unprotected sex.

The fourth reason for getting tested is if you are pregnant or thinking of having a baby. Transmission of HIV can occur during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding. If the mother is HIV positive, the transmis-

sion risk is highly preventable; an opportunity to prevent it should not be missed.

Getting tested also has another benefit: it can lead to earlier treatment. The improved treatment options available today mean people infected with HIV live much longer lives. Indeed, it has become a chronic disease that can be managed by antiretroviral medications and other therapies.

The sooner a person knows they are HIV positive, the sooner treatment can begin. Counselling and getting information about the disease and the treatment options is an important part of this process as well. And if pregnant, a woman can receive the medical support she, and her baby, need.

Now we know why to get tested, but when should it be done? HIV testing should be done three months

after the risky behaviour occurred. Because testing looks for antibodies that take three to six months to develop, anything sooner would not be especially useful. Besides, a too-early negative test would still mean another test at three months.

A special caution about testing and infection. During the period before testing positive, a person is at most risk to transmit HIV. During this ‘window period’ you should avoid all high risk behaviours.

HIV is not going away, nor is it becoming less dangerous. However, early detection provides more and better treatment options. Think about getting tested. Better yet, get tested.

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