

# What happens when you get tested for HIV?

Found at: <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite>

## What is the test looking for?

The HIV test is designed to detect antibodies to HIV in your blood or saliva. Antibodies are "fighter cells" produced by your body when you have an infection. If you are infected with HIV, your body makes very specific antibodies to fight the infection. The HIV antibodies are different from antibodies for the flu, hepatitis, or other infections. If you have HIV antibodies, then you have been infected with HIV. (The only exception to this applies to infants born to HIV-infected mothers; infants can receive HIV antibodies from their infected mothers that stay in their system for as long as 18 months.)

The HIV test does not tell you if you have AIDS or how long you have been infected or how sick you might be. It just tells you that you are infected with the virus (see [What are HIV/AIDS?](#)).

## The window period

The window period is the time it takes for your body to produce HIV antibodies after you have been exposed to HIV. In more than 97% of people, this period is between 2 and 12 weeks. In a very small number of people, the process takes up to 6 months.

The window period causes a lot of confusion. Here's an example: Let's say someone had unprotected sex on Saturday night. On Monday, he goes to get an HIV test. The test will almost certainly come back negative, even if he was infected with HIV on Saturday night, because his body has not yet had a chance to make antibodies. Even if he went for an HIV test 1 or 2 months later, he might still get a negative result even if he had been infected on that Saturday night; again, the reason is because he has not yet produced antibodies, which are what the HIV test is looking for.

If you are worried about something that happened that may have exposed you to HIV, you naturally will want to get tested as soon as possible. A good strategy would be to go back for a test 3 months after your possible exposure; the result you get after 3 months will be 99% certain. However, if you think you may have been exposed to HIV and are having [symptoms](#) of HIV infection, see a doctor right away. The doctor may be able to perform a different kind of test called a Polymerase Chain Reaction (commonly called "PCR") test that can detect actual virus (versus the antibodies to the virus) in the blood. If you think you may have been exposed to HIV recently (regardless of whether you have symptoms), talk to a counselor or health care provider about when you should be tested.

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