HIV ‘self-testing’ kits: Know the facts

Q. What's changing?

A. From April 2014 it will be legal in the UK to sell or advertise HIV ‘self-testing’ kits.

Q. Can I buy one now?

A. Not yet. There are currently no CE marked self-test kits on the market in the UK. Self-tests kits cannot be sold without this CE mark which shows that the manufacturer has met required standards in relation to test performance, directions for use and labelling. We expect there to be some available towards the end of 2014/early 2015. However, self-sampling tests are currently available, see below.

Q. Why has the law changed?

A. It is hoped the change in policy will encourage people to test for HIV who may be reluctant to go to a sexual health clinic, GP surgery or hospital. Increasing testing options will help reduce the high level of people with undiagnosed HIV and the numbers diagnosed late. In the UK one in five people who have HIV don’t know they have it and in 2012 nearly half of those diagnosed were diagnosed late, meaning they have been living with the virus for at least four years.

Increasing testing options is important as late diagnosis can mean worse health outcomes, a decreased life expectancy and a greater chance of passing the virus on. People diagnosed late also have a ten-fold increased risk of death within one year of HIV diagnosis compared to those diagnosed promptly.

In addition, illegal self-testing kits are now available online. These tests do not meet the required standard so lifting the ban means that regulated self-testing kits will be available in the UK, guaranteeing the quality and accuracy of tests. Testing technology has improved in recent years and self-tests are now more reliable and easier for people to use at home. However, most self-test kits will be 3rd generation and not as reliable as 4th generation tests offered in clinics.

Q. What's the difference between ‘self-sampling’ and ‘self-testing’ for HIV?

A. Home self-sampling kits have been available in the UK for a while. In home self-sampling, you use the kit to take a sample (saliva or blood) which you send to a laboratory for analysis. The results will then come to you separately via phone or text (depending on the result).

Home self-testing gives you the result there and then, at home, without the need for another individual or a laboratory.
Q. Are HIV self-tests reliable?

A. The tests will have to meet certain standards and will have to be approved by the Medicines and Healthcare Agency (MHRA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA). This will mean that the self-testing kits are regulated and that the information provided with the kits is checked so that it is easy to understand and accurate.

You should look out for the CE mark to make sure you are using a kit which has been approved. It is important to follow the instructions carefully so that the kit works properly. No self-test kit is 100% reliable; if you get a 'reactive' (positive) result it doesn’t mean you definitely have HIV, you need to go to a healthcare setting (for example a sexual health clinic or your GP practice) where they will perform another test. HIV treatment is now very effective and if you do have HIV you will be offered treatment, care and support.

The ‘window period’ (the amount of time between HIV infection and the infection being detectable by a test) for most self-tests is three months, longer than for a laboratory test. If you have put yourself at risk within the past three months and got HIV, it may not show up in a home self-test so it would be better to access testing in a clinic where a laboratory test with a shorter window period would be used.

Q. Should I use an HIV self-test? Is it right for me?

A. If you think you may be at risk of HIV then it is always advisable to have an HIV test. If you have HIV then the earlier you are diagnosed the better. Advances in treatment mean that someone living with HIV toady can expect to have a normal life expectancy. However, you can access tests in a number of ways (see below).

If you are considering using a self-test at home you should think about what knowing your HIV status will mean to you and perhaps think about having a trusted friend or partner present to support you. Think this through and seek advice if you need to. THT’s confidential helpline is open Mon-Fri 10am -8pm on 0808 802 1221.

You may prefer the idea of taking a test in the privacy of your own home. If you do decide this is right for you, make sure that you fully understand how to use the kit, read the instructions and follow them carefully. It is also important to understand how to interpret the results and to seek a confirmatory test from a clinic or your GP practice should the result be ‘reactive’ (positive).

Q. What do I do with the result?

A. If the result is negative and you have used the test properly then you don’t need to follow-up with a confirmatory test as long as you have not engaged in high-risk behaviour within the window period of the test (three months for most self-test kits).

If the result is ‘reactive’ you should have a follow up test with a clinician to confirm your HIV status. If your confirmatory test is positive you will get to support to access appropriate care and treatment.

Q. Will I have to pay for self-tests?

A. You will be able to buy self-testing kits once they are on the market. Whether or not self-testing will be available for free is likely to depend on the needs and priorities of your local area.

There are currently some free home self-sampling services which are accessible to those at higher risk.

Q. What about other STIs?

A. Self-test HIV kits do not test for other STIs and it is important that you consider a full sexual health check as well as an HIV test. You should test regularly if you are considered to be at risk – it’s recommended that men who have sex with men should have an HIV test and STI screen at least annually and every three months if having sex with new or casual partners. Black African men and women should have a regular test and STI screen if having sex with new or casual partners.

A negative HIV self-test should not impact on your decision to use a condom during sex. Condoms are the most effective way to protect against STIs and HIV.

Q. Where can I currently get an HIV test?

A. HIV testing is currently available in a number of different settings in the UK, including:
• Sexual health or genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics
• At your GP surgery
• At home using a self-sampling kit

For more information on HIV tests and where you can go to have one see: http://www.nat.org.uk/Our-thinking/Prevention-and-testing/Testing.aspx

To find out what sort of tests are available and how they work see the NAT factsheet.

Who we are: NAT (National AIDS Trust) is the UK’s leading charity dedicated to transforming society’s response to HIV. We provide fresh thinking, expertise and practical resources. We champion the rights of people living with HIV and campaign for change.


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