Home Testing for HIV: What You Need to Know

What is HIV Home Testing?

Home testing, also referred to as self-testing for HIV, are HIV test kits that can be purchased over the counter and performed in the privacy of one’s home. Similar to over the counter pregnancy tests, collecting a sample for HIV home testing is performed by the individual and without the assistance of health care workers or other trained professionals. Home testing kits do not test for the virus itself, but rather for antibodies.

HIV home tests are not approved for sale in Canada. There are a number of HIV home tests available in other countries and for sale online. It is important to know that home tests purchased online or in other countries may be completely unregulated and not meet approved guidelines for safety and accuracy. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration has approved and licensed two types of HIV home testing kits:

- The Home Access HIV-1 Test System involves pricking your finger to collect a blood sample, sending the sample to a licensed medical laboratory, and then calling in for anonymous results as early as the next business day. If the test is positive a second test is performed before results are given. The manufacturer provides confidential counselling and referral to treatment. These tests detect HIV infection later than a laboratory test which draws blood from a vein, but earlier than oral swab tests\(^{(1,2)}\).

- The OraQuick In-Home HIV Test involves swabbing your mouth for a saliva sample and using a solution to test immediately in your home. Results are available in 20 minutes. OraQuick is a screening test; a positive test result is considered preliminary and will need to be confirmed and followed up by a local health provider. The manufacturer provides confidential counselling and referrals to follow-up testing sites. Because the level of HIV antibodies is lower in saliva, these tests detect HIV infection later than blood tests\(^{(1-3)}\).
Are HIV Home Tests Accurate?

For identifying HIV negative results, the OraQuick home test has been shown to be 99.9% accurate. This is equally as accurate as testing done on blood samples in medically supervised laboratory settings\(^{(4, 6)}\).

However, because saliva contains lower levels of HIV antibodies, it can take longer for HIV infection to be detected. In other words, the window period for OraQuick tests is longer than other forms of HIV testing involving blood samples. The window period refers to the amount of time after HIV enters the body until enough antibodies have developed to show up in a test.

The type of HIV testing performed at clinics and doctor’s offices in Alberta will, in the majority of cases, detect HIV infection 3 weeks after the point of exposure\(^{(5)}\). With OraQuick, the window period can extend to 3 months. Therefore, someone who is HIV positive but still in the 3 month window period may receive a false negative result with OraQuick. Studies indicate approximately 7-10% of HIV positive people received a negative result (false negative) when testing with OraQuick during the window period\(^{(6)}\). As with all forms of HIV testing, it is important to understand the window period and the possibility of inaccurate results in the timeframe shortly after infection has occurred.

What are some Concerns about HIV Home Testing?

- Some commentators on HIV home testing have suggested that availability may lead to coercive or non-voluntary testing. For example, people could be coerced into HIV testing for employment reasons, school admissions or in social and interpersonal situations. In particular, there is concern for the safety of an HIV positive person who may be forced to have their HIV status revealed. Non-voluntary testing for HIV in any situation is considered a human rights violation\(^{(7, 8)}\).

- There is concern about a lack of support services such as pre and post-test counselling in some home testing situations. This could involve an individual’s reaction to a preliminary positive test result or the missed opportunity for education and resources to reduce risk in the case of a negative result. Similarly, home testing does not include the opportunity for additional STI diagnoses and education as in other testing settings like clinics or doctor’s offices\(^{(7-9)}\).

- Home testing may present situations where there is a lack of appropriate follow-up, referral and linkage to care in the case of a positive result. It is very important that persons newly diagnosed with HIV receive adequate support and medical services, but it has been suggested that home based testing may decrease the likelihood that an individual will follow up with appropriate health services\(^{(7-9)}\).

- As with all types of non-clinical testing for medical conditions, quality assurance is a concern. The risk of inaccurate test results increases when sample collection and testing
kits are subject to uncontrolled environments, improper storage conditions, and/or misuse by the consumer (7-9).

- The cost of HIV home testing is often cited as a potential barrier, particularly for some of the hardest to reach and most at risk populations. In the United States, home tests range from $20-$40. There is concern that this form of testing would only be available to affluent people and thereby have little impact on those who would benefit most (7-9).

**What are some Benefits of HIV Home Testing?**

- One of the greatest potential benefits of home testing is increasing the number of people tested for HIV. Enhanced access to low barrier testing is well documented as one of the most effective strategies to reduce new HIV infections as a majority of HIV transmission occurs when people are unaware they are HIV positive (10-12). Early diagnosis and consequent treatment and support services are also key factors in the health, wellness and quality of life of People Living with HIV.

- Home testing may have a role to play in normalizing and helping to de-stigmatize all forms of HIV testing, leading to improved rates of testing and diagnoses. Because of the unprecedented stigma and discrimination associated with HIV, it is not uncommon for people to avoid HIV testing for fear of assumptions and discussion of sexual and/or drug use risk behaviours. If home testing products are commonplace and desensitized, stigma and fear of HIV testing may decrease (7-9).

- Home testing can present a welcome opportunity in settings where convenience, confidentiality, privacy, and access present barriers to HIV testing. For example, in many parts of Canada there are little to no opportunities for testing without health insurance or out-of-pocket payment, no anonymous HIV testing, long wait times for testing and results, or simply no HIV testing available, particularly in rural and remote communities. Additionally many of the most at risk populations for HIV already experience significant barriers to accessing health care, such as mental health, addictions, isolation and poverty (7-9).

**Will people use HIV Home testing?**

A number of studies have demonstrated high acceptability of HIV home testing among diverse populations. This includes including key populations for HIV testing such as those most at risk and those who have never been tested (13-18).

In a comprehensive meta-analysis of 21 diverse clinical studies on self-testing for HIV, researchers found preference for these strategies was evident; acceptability rates were between 74-96% (13). The majority of the studies analyzed were in high income countries (89%) where acceptability of unsupervised self-testing (i.e. home testing) was highest. As such, researchers
hypothesize that uptake and acceptability of self-testing assumes a basic level of literacy and a certain level of motivation and independence \(^{(13)}\).

In a Canadian-specific context, an ongoing study of 100 university students found self-tests were reported to be convenient (98%), time-efficient (96%), and pain free (84%). Approximately 81% preferred self-tests to standard HIV testing and further 71% expressed the desire to buy them over-the-counter \(^{(14)}\).

**More Information:**

If you have questions or would like more information about HIV home testing, do not hesitate to contact HIV Community Link at 403-508-2500 or email info@hivcl.org. We can meet with you in person or provide anonymous and confidential services by phone or email. Our trained professionals are also able to provide pre and post-test counseling and follow up if you decide to access HIV home testing products*


Note* HIV home tests are not approved for sale in Canada. Health Canada warns Canadians to be cautious of the safety and effectiveness of unlicensed HIV home testing products \(^{(19)}\). HIV Community Link does not generally endorse the use of unauthorized medical devices, but recognizes that Canadians are currently, and will increasingly continue to access these products.

(prevention + support + advocacy)
References


(prevention + support + advocacy)

PHONE: (403) 508-2500 | FAX: (403) 263-7358 | 110 – 1602 10 Ave SW, AB T3C 0J7 | www.hivcl.org


