Testing for blood borne viruses

Information for you
There are three blood borne viruses (BBV): HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

These viruses are mainly passed through contact with infected blood. However, the viruses can be present in other body fluids.

BBVs are passed between people through:

• Sharing equipment to inject or snort drugs – even if only once. This includes needles, syringes, spoons, water, filters, acidifiers, and straws.

• Unprotected sex – vaginal, anal or oral

• Unsterile medical treatment or unsterile body piercing / tattoos – for example, home or prison tattoos

• Sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infected person

• Blood transfusions before 1991 or blood products before 1988

BBVs can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby. Treatment can greatly reduce the transmission risk of HIV and Hepatitis B. The risk of a mother passing on Hepatitis C to her baby is very low.
HIV and Hepatitis B are far more common in men who have sex with men and in people who have lived abroad, especially in Southern Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Hepatitis C is common in drug users who have ever injected. Hepatitis C is less likely to be transmitted through sex.

**What are the BBV tests?**

The only way to know if a person has a BBV is to get a blood test. Each virus has its own blood test that tells us different things about the infection.

**HIV:** The first test is an antibody test. This checks the body’s immune reaction to the virus. If this test for HIV is positive, it means that you are infected with the virus. Other tests called the CD4 count and the viral load will be then taken to see if the immune system has been damaged yet and how much virus is in the blood.

**Hepatitis C:** The test for Hepatitis C is a two stage process. The first test is called an antibody test. This test will show if you have ever been exposed to the virus. If the result of the antibody test is positive, another test called a PCR test will determine if the virus is still present in your body. If the antibody test is positive and the PCR test is negative, this means
that you have been exposed to the virus but the infection is not active. If both the antibody test and the PCR test results are positive, you have an active Hepatitis C infection. If you are PCR positive you may be at risk of liver disease.

**Hepatitis B:** A blood test will be taken to see if the body is making antibodies to try and fight the Hepatitis B virus. If this test is positive, there is Hepatitis B infection. Other markers can tell how much of the virus is present or if a person has fought off the virus naturally.

HIV can take around 12 weeks to show up in the blood, while Hepatitis B and C can take around three to six months to show up. If you have been at risk during this time you may be advised to get a repeat test even if your first result is negative. If you put yourself at risk again, you should consider having another test.

**Why have a test?**

It is important to get a test for a number of reasons. All three BBVs can cause serious illness if left untreated and can, in some cases, be fatal. In the early stages of infection many people feel well and do not realise they are infected. Research has shown that the earlier a diagnosis is made, the
more effective treatment can be. There is effective treatment for all three BBVs. Hepatitis C can be cured in some cases and treatment for HIV and Hepatitis B can help to control the virus.

Knowing about an infection allows you to protect your health – for example, by stopping drinking alcohol if you have Hepatitis B or C.

You can also take steps to protect others from getting the infection from you by avoiding unsafe sex and not sharing any equipment for drug use. Women can also make choices about pregnancy and protecting their unborn child from HIV and Hepatitis B.

Are there reasons not to have a test?

In most cases it is much better to know if you have a BBV infection so that you can access support. Your health can be monitored and you can access any necessary treatment and support services.

If you are depressed or feel like you could not cope with a positive result it may be better to get help with this before you take the test – but most people cope with diagnosis even if they thought they could not.
Going for a test

It can be stressful to go alone – think about taking a friend you trust for support, especially when you are going to get the result.

All services are confidential and we will not disclose your result without your consent. In most cases you will be given the result in person. It is important that you arrange to discuss your results with your family doctor (GP), key worker or named nurse.

Further information

For more information, contact:

- BBV team on 01563 827138 or 01563 545508
- Addiction Services:
  - East: 01563 574237
  - North: 01294 476162
  - South: 01292 559800
- Sexual Health Department
  - 01294 323226

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Last reviewed: November 2013
Leaflet reference: MIS13-110-CC