HIV point of care testing

What is an HIV point of care test?

An HIV point of care test (POCT) is undertaken and the results given at the same visit. The person performing the test has received specific training in the use and interpretation of the test. HIV POCTs, also known as rapid HIV tests, have been approved for use in Australia since 2012.

The name rapid HIV test describes the short time between collecting a sample for testing and getting a result. It does not mean that the test can detect the presence of HIV soon after a potential exposure.

When to use an HIV POCT

It takes up to 12 weeks for the body to produce sufficient amounts of HIV antibodies to be detected by the HIV POCT. This is known as the window period. If you have had a potential exposure to HIV within 12 weeks of the HIV POCT it is recommended that you have another test 12 weeks after the potential exposure as the result of a test within the window period may not be as accurate.

How many HIV POCTs have been approved for use in Australia?

There are currently three HIV POCTs approved for use in Australia:

- Alere HIV Combo Test (Alere)
- Uni Gold HIV Test (Immuno)
- OraQuick Advance HIV-1/2 (Integrated Sciences)

What is an HIV point of care test used for?

HIV POCTs are used to provide results quickly to a client following testing. The tests have been approved for screening purposes only. Use of HIV POCTs is recommended for targeted testing of populations where a higher proportion of the population have HIV, including men who have sex with men, or the sexual partners of people from countries where HIV is more common than Australia.

Test results are referred to as either ‘non-reactive’ or ‘reactive’, however you may be more familiar with the terms ‘negative’ or ‘positive’. HIV POCTs have been approved for screening purposes but they do not provide a definitive diagnosis. If the test result is reactive, a conventional blood test must also be performed and sent to a laboratory for confirmatory testing.

How is an HIV point of care test performed?

Usually a small amount of blood is collected by finger prick. The blood is collected in a small pipette and transferred to the test device.

HIV POCTs can use a variety of specimens to detect evidence of HIV including whole blood or oral fluids. This will vary depending on the brand of HIV POCT being used.

What does an HIV point of care test detect?

Like conventional HIV tests, HIV POCTs can detect antibodies to HIV that the immune system produces in response to the presence of the HIV in the body. One of the HIV POCTs (Determine HIV 1/2 Ag/Ab Combo Test) can also identify an HIV antigen. The antigen, called p24, is a protein found within the virus. This protein can be detected in the blood earlier than HIV antibodies.

How long does it take to get a result?

The length of time required to get a result will depend on the brand of test used. All HIV POCTs can provide a result in 20 minutes or less.

How accurate is an HIV point of care test?

All HIV POCTs approved for use in Australia must perform to a high level. However, HIV POCTs may not perform with the same accuracy as the ‘gold standard’ laboratory test. This is because HIV POCTs are often performed with samples such as blood from a finger prick or oral fluid while laboratory tests use serum or plasma derived from the blood sample collected. It is possible the HIV POCT could produce a false reactive or false non-reactive result, but this is uncommon. Your care provider can discuss the performance and limitations of the specific HIV POCT with you in more detail.

What happens if the test result is reactive?

If the HIV POCT is reactive, a sample of blood will be collected and sent to the laboratory for confirmatory testing. Collecting a sample of blood to be tested in the laboratory will confirm if the HIV POCT was a true reactive result or a false reactive result. Results from laboratory HIV tests can
take up to seven days to be processed. Your care provider will be your contact while you are waiting for the laboratory test result to return. They will advise you when the result is available.

What happens if the test result is invalid?

An invalid result means that the test has not worked correctly. It does not mean that the test has detected HIV antibodies or antigen. An invalid result may happen for a number of reasons, such as blood clotting before it is absorbed by the test. If your test produces an invalid result the person performing the test will offer to perform another HIV POCT. You may choose to have a laboratory test instead.

What happens if the test result is non-reactive?

If the HIV POCT produces a non-reactive result, it means that the test did not detect evidence of HIV in your sample, within the capability of the test. The published sensitivity and specificity of HIV POCTs are based on detection of HIV antibodies from 12 weeks after a potential exposure to HIV.

If your most recent potential exposure to HIV was in the previous 72 hours speak to your care provider about post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). PEP is a treatment that may prevent HIV transmission and is available to persons likely to have been exposed to HIV within the past 72 hours. Read the fact sheet on post-exposure prophylaxis–HIV (http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/116/520/post-exposure-prophylaxis-hiv) for more information.

The person performing the HIV POCT will interpret the HIV POCT result in consideration of the potential exposure you have discussed with them. It is important to provide as much information as you can so the advice you receive is appropriate for you. If you have had a potential exposure within 12 weeks of the test, it is recommended that you retest once 12 weeks since the exposure have passed.

Very rarely an HIV POCT may produce a false non-reactive result, meaning that even though HIV is present, the test did not detect it. The person performing the test will discuss with you the sensitivity of the test being used.

How often should I get tested for HIV?

How often a person should test for HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STI's) is based on individual circumstances and potential exposures. Your care provider can discuss this with you in more detail.

Where can I have an HIV point of care test?

HIV POCTs are available at most Queensland Government sexual health clinics and selected general practices and community organisations.

The following websites keep up to date information of locations offering HIV point of care testing.


You could also contact the manufacturers of HIV POCTs to find out locations they supply.

Can I test for HIV at home?

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has approved the use of HIV test devices for home use in Australia. However, no manufacturer has approached the TGA to have their HIV test approved for home use. This means that there are no Australian approved tests which can be purchased by individuals. Caution should be exercised if attempting to purchase an HIV test for home use on the internet as the standard, quality and reliability of these tests is not guaranteed.

Further information

For additional information in relation to HIV point of care testing, HIV and other STI testing you can contact:

- your regular health care provider or general practitioner (GP)
- Queensland Health Contact Centre (13 HEALTH) 13 43 25 84.