

# Indeterminate HIV test results: when first results are unclear



## Taking an HIV test?

**There are now several different ways to test for HIV. See Box 1.**

These usually produce results that show you are either HIV positive or HIV negative.

Sometimes though the test result might not be clear. This can make testing more stressful, when you just want to know your status.

This leaflet is about test results that are not clear.

## Unclear results

**An indeterminate test result means it is not yet clear if the result is HIV positive or HIV negative.**

Rather than an on/off response, these results are a bit on and a bit off.

## Reasons for unclear results

**Reasons for unclear results include:**

- It might still be too early for your immune system to react to HIV. This is called the window period.
- The test result is just very weak or unclear.
- Recent use of PEP (post exposure prophylaxis) or PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) might delay the response.
- The test shows responses to one or two parts of HIV rather than the full virus.
- The test might pick up antibodies from another infection. This could be from recently or from years ago. Examples include COVID, CMV, hepatitis B, malaria or TB but often the cause is not known. This is called cross-reactivity.
- The test can also pick up antibodies from a recent vaccine, pregnancy, immune conditions like arthritis or lupus or from chemicals like bilirubin that are made by your body.
- Some people who took part in an HIV vaccine study might show signs of HIV even though they are HIV negative. This is called vaccine-induced seropositivity.

### **BOX 1: Types of HIV test**

- finger-prick or blood samples or saliva.
- home testing or home sampling or lab testing.
- Antibody (immune response).
- Antigen (viral particles).
- HIV viral load (RNA) or DNA.

What happens if the HIV test result is unclear?

**If a test result is unclear, you will be asked to come back two weeks later to give a new sample (See Box 2).**

If new antibodies have developed, this will give a final clear result.

- New antibodies show that the first test was just too early. The new result is now HIV positive.
- No change usually means that other antibodies were the problem. The new result is now HIV negative.

### **BOX 2 - If HIV test results are unclear**

First HIV test (antibody, antibody/antigen,)

Test to confirm results (at a lab)

Second HIV test (two weeks later)

HIV viral load and DNA

Expert advice on PrEP and further testing

Referral to the IDRIS clinic

What happens if the result is still unclear?

**If the results are still unclear, they are usually reviewed by a virologist.**

This expert might recommend extra tests.

If needed, a specialist clinic in London can help. It's called the IDRIS Clinic

Your local clinic can link you to IDRIS or you can contact them directly by email.

[imperial.idris@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.idris@nhs.net)

## The IDRIS Clinic

### **The tests run by the IDRIS clinic on new samples include:**

- HIV DNA in two labs
- Western blot
- Markers of the immune system (T cells)

HIV DNA testing is less likely to be affected by recent or current use of HIV meds. This is for both treatment or prevention.

Very rarely, in people taking PrEP, repeat tests may need to be done a few weeks after safely stopping PrEP.

Please do NOT stop taking PEP or PrEP unless your doctor asks you to.

These extra antibody and HIV gene tests usually give a definite HIV result.

## Testing if now using PrEP

### **Some people start PrEP straight after PEP.**

Other people continue PrEP even if the HIV test is unclear.

If you are still using PrEP or PEP, please do NOT stop this to test for HIV.

If all the HIV tests are still unclear, please talk to your doctor about the next steps.

Depending on your circumstances and possible risk for HIV, your doctor might want you to continue PrEP or stop for further testing. These cases are very rare.

Stopping PrEP for 1–2 months should be enough time for tests to produce better test results. This means finding alternative ways to protect you against HIV for this time.

If all tests are negative, it will be okay to restart PrEP. Routine HIV testing is still recommended on PrEP, and also 1–2 months after PrEP is eventually stopped.

If the tests become positive, then HIV treatment (ART) is recommended. This is usually with one or two daily pills that contain two or three HIV meds.

## Elite controllers and ART

### **Very rarely, some people test HIV-antibody positive but have no detectable virus (HIV RNA or DNA).**

This is because of a very strong immune response that can control HIV without treatment. This is called being an HIV controller (or elite controller). Less than 1 in 100 people (<1%) living with HIV are elite controllers.

HIV guidelines currently recommend ART for everyone including HIV controllers.

However, guidelines recognise that the evidence for using ART is more limited for this group and some elite controllers choose not to start treatment. In this case referral to a specialist clinic like IDRIS will carefully monitor CD4 count and viral load.

The benefits for an HIV controller to take ART include that it will limit problems caused by low levels of HIV over many years. It will also prevent any unexpected increase in viral load later.

Sometimes people who start off controlling HIV see their viral load steadily increase to higher levels over time.

## Indeterminate Retrovirus Infection Service (IDRIS)

### **The IDRIS clinic is a UK national specialist NHS free service that provides expert advice about what might work best for you.**

You can ask your clinic doctor or refer yourself for an appointment if you would like to talk about this ([imperial.idris@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.idris@nhs.net)).

This is a safe, free, expert confidential clinic set in an NHS hospital (St Mary's) in London. The clinic runs once every two months.

<https://www.imperial.nhs.uk/sexual-health/hiv-care>

#### Further links

1. <https://i-base.info/guides/testing/appendix-1-different-types-of-hiv-test>

<https://www.aidsmap.com/news/jun-2023/uk-cohort-elite-controllers-finds-32-people-undetectable-viral-loads-who-have-never>

<https://i-base.info/htb/31697>