

Increasing access to and frequency of HIV testing is essential to ensure people are diagnosed early, provided timely treatment, and linked into ongoing care. Minimising the time between infection, diagnosis and treatment improves health outcomes and reduces opportunities for onward transmission. This is a critical component of implementing a combination HIV prevention approach which aims to end new HIV transmissions by 2025.

The New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) recommends:

- All sexually active gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBM) should test regularly. For those not using condoms consistently for anal sex, consider testing every three months for HIV and STIs
- For those taking PrEP, testing should be part of a regular 3-monthly sexual health care undertaken with a GP or Sexual Health Clinic
- Other sexually active people should test at least once per year

HIV testing for treatment and prevention

HIV testing is the first step to enabling people to know they are living with HIV and to be linked to HIV prevention, treatment and care services.

Starting treatment early ensures better long term health outcomes. Treatment also supports people to reach an undetectable viral load. For people who receive a negative test result for HIV, it is an opportunity to connect to HIV prevention options like condoms or PrEP.

Testing to end HIV transmissions

Minimising the time between infection, diagnosis and treatment improves health outcomes and reduces opportunities for onward transmission.

In the initial period after a person contracts HIV, their viral load is highest and they are at the most acute stage of infection. It is estimated that a disproportionate number of new HIV infections occur during this period, when a person is unaware they are living with HIV and their viral load is high.⁽¹⁾

New Zealand has virtually eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV. However it is important that ante-natal HIV testing continues to be part of a wider HIV testing approach to end HIV transmissions in New Zealand.

Reducing late diagnosis of HIV

Improving access to and acceptability of HIV testing is important to ensure more people are diagnosed early and are promptly connected to care and treatment. Late diagnosis of HIV, when a person's CD4 count is below 350, is associated with more serious health issues, including AIDS-defining illnesses.

HIV transmission within heterosexual populations in New Zealand is low, however they are more likely to be diagnosed late, with advanced symptoms of HIV infection compared with gay and bisexual men.⁽²⁾ It is important to encourage early testing amongst heterosexual men and women if they have been at risk of HIV at any point during their life or have symptoms of HIV infection.

Comprehensive HIV and STI testing

HIV testing provides an opportunity to screen for other sexually transmitted infections and viral hepatitis. HIV testing should be undertaken for those with risk factors for HIV and when an STI or hepatitis are present (particularly gonorrhoea or syphilis).

For those taking PrEP, HIV testing should be part of their regular sexual health care and be undertaken every three months alongside other STI tests.

Increasing frequency of HIV testing

NZAF is committed to increasing the frequency of HIV testing for people at risk of HIV. In a survey of HIV negative gay and bisexual men, not using PrEP, 19% reported never testing for HIV despite reporting more than three condomless male anal partners within the last 6 months.⁽³⁾

It is recommended that gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men test for HIV every 3 months if having regular sex without a condom or taking PrEP.⁽⁴⁾

Removing barriers to HIV testing

People can face a number of barriers to test for HIV, including cost, time, privacy, ease of testing, fear of a positive test result and the fear of HIV stigma and discrimination. To attract those at risk of HIV to test more often, a range of HIV testing options need to be made available that address a number of these barriers.

Cost – HIV tests are available free of charge through sexual health clinics and community providers such as NZAF, Body Positive, Positive Women and Family Planning.

Timely – HIV Rapid tests provide a preliminary result in 20 minutes. They are available through NZAF health clinics, Body Positive and Positive Women.

Privacy – All HIV testing is confidential and provided with appropriate information and support.

Access – NZAF also provide testing in the community, delivered by peer testers to normalise the testing process and reduce the anxiety associated with HIV and testing. Self-testing kits for HIV home testing are also available through the NZAF website.

Stigma – Targeted communication and marketing initiatives to mobilise at-risk populations to test frequently and challenge stigma and misinformation around HIV and HIV testing.

Home testing to increase access to HIV testing

WHO recommend that HIV self-testing should be offered as an additional approach to HIV testing services. Home testing has shown to be a highly acceptable HIV self-testing option. It breaks down a number of barriers, increasing testing in populations at high risk of HIV who have never, or are rarely tested for HIV.

To be the most effective, home testing services should be provided with clear information, support services and linkage to treatment and care for those who show a preliminary positive test result.

NZAF support home testing for use by communities that are consistently under-represented in HIV testing in New Zealand. This includes high risk GBM, Māori and Pasifika men who have sex with men, rural communities and African communities. NZAF will continue to work with clinicians to provide timely treatment and care to people who test positive for HIV through home testing.

Increasing testing rates will significantly reduce HIV transmissions and enable our goal to end HIV transmission in New Zealand by 2025.

The New Zealand AIDS Foundation will:

- Advocate for New Zealand to commit to UNAIDS 90-90-90 which includes the target where 90% of people living with HIV have tested and been diagnosed with a positive result ⁽⁵⁾
- Scale up home testing services to reach communities at high risk of HIV who are not currently being tested for HIV, in particular those who are living rurally or who have never tested for HIV
- Increase access to and frequency of NZAF HIV testing to gay and bisexual men and African communities through our HIV testing, outreach testing and peer testing services
- Advocate for testing as part of a combination HIV prevention approach

A combination HIV prevention approach includes:

- Maximising condom use for the prevention of HIV and STIs
- Equitable PrEP uptake among those who need an alternative primary prevention intervention to condoms,
- Reducing undiagnosed HIV infection through more timely and widespread testing
- Prompt treatment access and adherence support for PLHIV to maximise their health and maximise the chance of sustained viral suppression, subsequently halting the onward sexual transmission of HIV

References

1. Li Z, Purcell DW, Sansom SL, Hayes D, Hall HI. Vital Signs: HIV Transmission Along the Continuum of Care — United States, 2016. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2019;68:267–272.
1. AIDS Epidemiology Group UoO. AIDS - New Zealand. University of Otago, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine DSoM, Otago Uo; 2017 2017.
3. Foundation NZA. Ending HIV Evaluation Surveys 2017 – 2018, 3 surveys 2018.
4. DiNenno EA, Prejean J, Irwin K, Delaney KP, Bowles K, Martin T, et al. Recommendations for HIV screening of gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men—United States, 2017. *MMWR Morbidity and mortality weekly report*. 2017;66(31):830.
5. HIV/AIDS JUNPo, HIV/Aids JUNPo. 90-90-90: An ambitious treatment target to help end the AIDS epidemic. Geneva: UNAIDS. 2014.