

Voluntary Counseling and Testing

Voluntary counselling and testing is the process whereby a person who has decided to be tested for HIV is first counselled so that he/she can understand what the test and the possible result means and then tested and counselled again when the result is given.

V = Voluntary:

This means that it is the person's own decision whether he or she wants to be counselled or tested.

C = Counselling:

There are two stages of counselling: pre-test (before the test) and post-test (after the test) counselling. A trained counsellor will explain to the person who wants to be tested what the test is, how it works and what the outcome of the test could be. This helps the person to take an informed decision about being tested. Before the person is given the result of the test, the counsellor will again discuss the possible test result, provide information about how to live positively, and give information about support and referral or how to continue to be negative if the result is negative.

T = Testing:

A small amount of blood is taken and tested for HIV antibodies. If there are antibodies in the blood, the person is HIV positive. A blood test is "negative" when no antibodies are found. This can mean that a person is not infected with HIV or that it is too soon after the last risk encounter for the antibodies to develop (window period). That is why the counsellor will advise a person to come back for another test after three months. If a test result is positive, another test is done from the same blood sample to confirm the result. A person only gets the positive result when both tests show HIV-antibodies.

Why do people go for VCT?

- People have a test when they think they have put themselves at risk of HIV infection through unsafe sexual or drug injecting behaviour.

- People have a test when they think their partner may put them at risk of infection or when they have been subjected to sexual violence (rape).
- People have symptoms which could be HIV related so they can receive treatment care and support or they are referred by a doctor.
- A HIV test may be required for work, for study abroad or for insurance (in many countries this is not allowed as it is a human right's offence).

VCT is confidential

Only the client and the counsellor or health worker involved know that a test was performed and have access to the results. The information is not to be given to other health care providers, employers, insurers, schools or anyone else without the person's written permission.

Pre-test counselling

The counsellor will help the client to decide whether he/she wants to be tested for HIV or not. The client will be given time to ask questions and understand the new information. The counsellor may talk about the following:

- Reasons for wanting the test and what the personal risks are.
- What HIV and AIDS are and how HIV is transmitted. The counsellor will correct misconceptions.
- What the test is, how it will be done and the possible results and implications.
- The social support system of family and friends, especially if the test result is positive, but also if the result is negative. This is to help the person cope.
- A personal plan to reduce future risks.
- Informed consent or disagreement to do the HIV antibody test.

Time taken for the result to be known depends on the testing services (do they have to be sent to a laboratory or is the laboratory in the facility). The results are confidential and will be given only to the person who was tested.

Post-test counselling

If **the test is negative**, the discussion will focus on when to return for a second test if the risk behaviour happened in the last six

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months or the "window period" and how to remain negative.

The counsellor will also raise the issue of the HIV status of the sexual partner. If the person has a steady partner, he/she may want to encourage her/him to also take a test. If two people have been together for a long time and both have been faithful they will not be infected.

The counsellor will discuss how to remain negative.

If **the test is positive**, the counsellor will encourage the person to talk about his thoughts, fears and feelings. The counsellor will give guidance on:

- Development of a personalised risk-reduction plan, including prevention of re-infection. People living with HIV or AIDS need to know that they can be re-infected with every unsafe sexual act, leading to an earlier development of AIDS. When both partners are HIV positive they therefore have to practice safer sex.
- Options to remain healthy as long as possible including nutritional requirements and the need to keep body fitness.
- The sharing of confidentiality and discussing the potential advantages and disadvantages of sharing test results with other people.
- Access and referral to social, psychological, spiritual, medical and home-based support.
- Follow-up care and support, which may include: ongoing counselling, counselling of other family members and partners, social support, legal advice, referral for screening and treatment and medical referral.
- Linking up with support groups of people infected with HIV/AIDS (if these exist)

Effective counselling

Effective counselling requires:

- In depth knowledge about HIV and AIDS and the transmission routes
- Self awareness of one's beliefs, values and assumptions
- A respectful non-judgemental attitude
- Active listening, including accurate

reflection of issues and concerns

- Asking supportive questions that raise important issues
- Awareness of one's verbal and non-verbal behaviour
- Providing practical support, advice and information
- Discussing options for care, prevention and support
- Encouraging the person counselled and his/her family to make their own decisions
- A quiet, private environment
- Ensured confidentiality

Where is VCT available?

In Sindh (Karachi) and Punjab (Lahore) there is a government service where VCT is being carried out. However, these services focus on laboratory services for testing, also on blood samples sent from other provinces.

Currently, with funding from the Global Fund, 16 VCT centres are being planned and established all over Pakistan in public and private services. 5 ARV centres will also be established in Pakistan by the end of 2006.