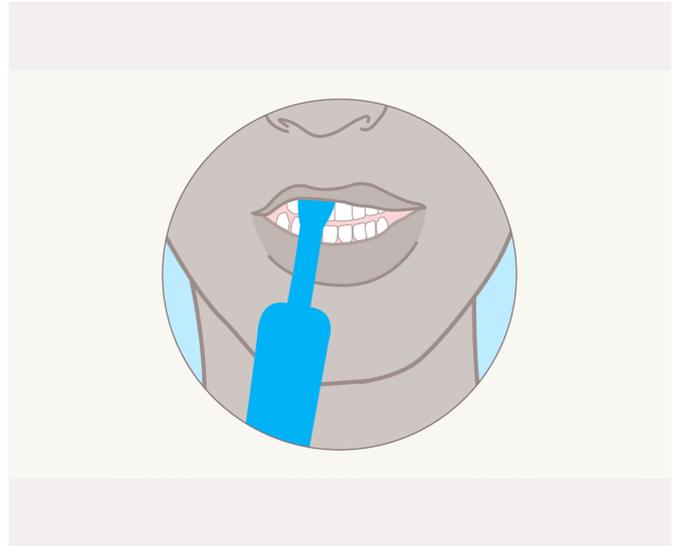


# Factsheet Home HIV testing

## Key points

- Self-sampling and self-testing are new options for taking an HIV test.
- You don't need to see a doctor or nurse to use home testing kits.
- HIV tests licensed for use in the UK are extremely accurate.



HIV testing is usually provided by medical professionals in hospital clinics, GP surgeries and other settings. It may also be provided by trained staff from HIV and community health organisations. In addition, there are some new options for taking an HIV test.

These are:

- Self-sampling: you collect your own sample, either of blood or of moisture from your mouth. You send this to a laboratory for analysis. They will make your results available by phone or text a few days later.
- Self-testing: you collect a sample of blood or of moisture from your mouth. You perform the whole test yourself. After a few minutes, you read and interpret your own test result.

You don't need to see a doctor or nurse, and you can use these kits wherever you want, including at home. For that reason, both approaches are often referred to as 'home testing'. For clarity, this factsheet uses the terms 'self-sampling' and 'self-testing'.

## Self-sampling

A number of sexual health clinics and charities have begun to offer free self-sampling services, including [56 Dean Street](#) and [Terrence Higgins Trust](#). Commercial companies including [Lloyds Pharmacy](#) and [Superdrug](#) also offer self-sampling kits. Self-sampling has always been legal in the United Kingdom.

There are some differences but generally the services work as follows:

- You order a self-sampling kit from the organisation's website. You may be asked some

questions to check you are eligible.

- The kit is sent to your home in the post.
- You collect your own sample. You may be given a tiny lancet (a pin) to prick your finger and produce a few drops of blood. Or you may be given a mouth-swab to collect moisture from your gums.
- You return the sample to the laboratory, by post.
- The laboratory contacts you by text or phone with the results. If the test shows you might have HIV, you will be contacted by phone to discuss the result and arrange confirmatory tests.

## Self-testing

Self-testing is different from self-sampling in that you perform the whole test yourself and you get the result immediately.

It used to be illegal to sell or advertise HIV self-testing kits in the UK – HIV testing equipment could only be sold to medical professionals. These restrictions were lifted in April 2014. Testing kits designed to be used by members of the public can now be sold, if the kit carries a CE mark to show it meets European performance and safety requirements.

*"Many people prefer home testing because it's quick, doesn't require a trip to a clinic and may feel more private."*

At present, two CE marked tests are available: the *INSTI HIV Self Test* and the *BioSure HIV Self Test*. Both devices involve using a safety lancet to produce a drop of blood from a finger and applying the blood to the test device. The result can be read instantly (*INSTI*) or after 15 minutes (*BioSure*). Studies suggest that both tests are very accurate, except for cases of recent infection. Both tests are sold for £29.95 through the manufacturers' websites: [INSTI](#) and [BioSure](#).

In the United States, one HIV self-testing kit has been licensed by regulators and approved for sale. In the future, its manufacturer may take the necessary steps so that it can be sold in the UK. The *OraQuick In-Home HIV Test* tests a sample of moisture from the mouth, and gives results in 20 minutes. It isn't quite as reliable as the tests used by medical professionals – in a study it gave an accurate result to 93% of people who had HIV and 99.9% of people who did not have HIV.

In addition, unregulated self-testing kits continue to be available from internet retailers. These kits may not meet European standards and may give inaccurate results. They may have been designed for use by medical professionals and be difficult for others to use correctly.

## How reliable are these tests?

The HIV tests licensed for use in the UK are extremely accurate. Nonetheless, no medical test is perfect. For this reason, medical professionals never tell someone they have HIV on the basis of one test result – if the result suggests infection with HIV, it must be confirmed with two more tests, using a different type of test kit each time.

The same rules apply with self-sampling and self-testing.

**If a test shows you might have HIV then you'll need to take more tests to confirm the result. These extra tests are best done at a sexual health clinic, where they have access to the most accurate HIV testing technologies.**

Clinic staff can also give you support and medical care.

If there are no signs of HIV ('HIV negative'), you need to take into account the test's 'window period'. In general, tests are not able to detect HIV until a few weeks after it was caught. The window period varies; some of the difference depends on the type of sample.

Some self-sampling services ask you to collect a tiny tube of blood, which you send off to a laboratory. In this case, the window period is the same as for many HIV tests used by health professionals. The test is usually able to detect HIV that was caught four weeks (one month) ago. But occasionally it can take up to twelve weeks (three months).

The *INSTI HIV Self Test* has a similar window period. It will usually be able to detect HIV that was caught four weeks (one month) ago. But occasionally it can take up to twelve weeks (three months). The manufacturer of the *BioSure HIV Self Test* says that its window period is twelve weeks (three months).

If the sample is moisture from your mouth, the window period may be longer. It may also be a little longer if the sample is a drop of blood squeezed onto a piece of paper. In these cases, tests are frequently able to detect HIV that was caught between four and eight weeks ago. But it may take up to twelve weeks for infections to be detected. This applies both to self-sampling using these kind of samples and the *OraQuick* self-test which is available in the United States.

The information on window periods means that if you test less than twelve weeks after an activity which could have exposed you to HIV (like sex without a condom), then an HIV-negative result is not definitive. You can only be sure by testing twelve weeks after the last risky activity.

The vast majority of people are likely to receive accurate results when using self-sampling and self-testing. They are also convenient ways to test. However if you have any concerns, you may prefer to test at a clinic, where they use the most advanced [HIV testing technologies](#).

## Choosing the right test for you

Many people prefer home testing because it's quick, doesn't require a trip to a clinic and may

feel more private. The convenience of these services could help you to test regularly. Home-testing kits have been designed to be easy to use. Nonetheless, you need to follow the instructions carefully to get an accurate result.

Some people prefer to go to a clinic where they are tested by a medical professional and can also be tested for other sexually transmitted infections. Also, if the test result is unclear or might be positive, staff can give you advice and check the result with additional tests straightaway.

Before testing by yourself, it's worth thinking about how you would cope if the test showed you might have HIV. It may be up to you to seek advice and support. This will be available from the service providing the test, local HIV organisations, sexual health clinics and HIV clinics. It would be very important to go to a clinic to have the test result checked.

HIV testing offered by NHS clinics and charities is free of charge. However a service offered by a private company may cost around £40.

## Find out more

**HIV testing** Simple factsheet

**Testing** Basic leaflet with pictures

**UK HIV test finder** Online, interactive tool