

Genitourinary Medicine

# Why it is important to test your child for HIV

Information for parents



## Why should I test my child for HIV?

There is now a very effective treatment for HIV called antiretroviral therapy (ART). This means that if a person knows they have HIV, their health can be monitored and this medication can keep them well.

The most dangerous thing for an HIV-positive child or adult in the UK is not knowing they have HIV. If you don't know your child's diagnosis and they do have HIV, they could become very ill. If you, and we, know their diagnosis, we can start their treatment and keep them well.

## How do children get HIV?

The main way children become infected with HIV is through mother-to-baby transmission during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding, if the mother is HIV positive at that time.

Other than that, HIV can be transmitted through sexual contact, sharing of needles or contact with infected blood. It does not get passed on through ordinary household contact.

## My child is healthy. Why should I worry – surely it would have shown up by now if they were infected?

Both adults and children with HIV can remain well with no outward signs for years, until the HIV weakens their immune system. (The immune system is the body's defence against illness and infections.) When the immune system becomes weak, the person becomes very vulnerable to HIV related disease, so they can suddenly develop dangerous and sometimes fatal illnesses.

Although most children born with HIV will start to show signs of illness before the age of 5, there are a number of children who remain perfectly healthy up to the age of 10, 15 or even, occasionally, 20 years. Therefore the only way to be sure that a child born to parents with HIV is not infected is to have a test.

## I do not want my child to know about my HIV infection. How can they be tested without finding out?

This is a concern for many parents. If the child is young, then those doing the test simply need your permission. Talk to the hospital consultant or your GP about the test and what a positive test result would mean to you.

If the child is older and can give their own permission for blood tests, you will need to talk to the hospital consultant or your GP about the best way to carry out the test. You need to feel comfortable about what your child is told, but at the same time your child will need to know what they are being tested for.

This is a difficult time, but the doctors and nurses supporting you have done this many times before and can help you through it. Talk to your doctor about what can be said, and also what you will say to your child if their test is positive.

## Why is this really so important? Can't we wait until they show some signs of infection before testing them?

This is important, and we should not wait. There have been a number of cases where children have become very ill, or have actually died, because they were not diagnosed with HIV in time. HIV testing of all children born to HIV-positive parents, and in particular mothers with HIV, can be a lifesaving action and should be done in every case. Even if your child looks healthy and feels healthy, no matter how old they are, they should have a test to make absolutely sure that they are HIV negative.

Most children tested in this way will be HIV negative. Those who are HIV positive need to be diagnosed as soon as possible. The medication really works, but if we don't know, we can't use it to keep them well.

## Further information

If you want more information about children and HIV, including services that support families, please visit: [www.chiva.org.uk](http://www.chiva.org.uk)

or ask your nurse or doctor about services available in your area.

## References

Content taken from British HIV Association "Don't Forget the Children – Guidance for the HIV testing of children with HIV-positive parents", 2009.

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473** or email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

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