

DEFINITIONS

Antibody – produced by the body’s immune system in response to an outside body that causes disease, such as a virus or bacteria. Antibodies are specific to the particular virus or bacteria.

Antigen – the part of a virus or bacteria that the immune system recognises as being an intruder

Anonymous linked testing – HIV testing where the results cannot be linked to the person whose blood has been tested, except with the consent of that person. Usually the person uses a false name, a number or code to preserve their identity.

Anonymous unlinked testing – HIV testing where the results cannot be linked with the person whose blood has been tested, for example by not putting a name on the sample

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) – treatment with drugs that affect the virus itself

Assay – a test designed to detect a specific substance, such as antibodies to a virus

Asymptomatic – when a person has HIV infection but is well and has no signs or symptoms of HIV-related illness

Batch testing – testing a large number of samples at one time

Compulsory testing – see ‘Mandatory testing’

Confidentiality – when information about a person is not passed on to anyone else other than the person who has been tested

Confirmatory testing – when a supplementary test is used to confirm an initial positive diagnosis of HIV infection

Discordant couples – couples where one person is HIV-positive and the other is HIV-negative

Enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) – test that detects antibodies, such as HIV

False negative – a negative test result when the blood sample is infected with HIV

False positive – a positive test result when the blood sample is not infected with HIV

Immune system – the body’s defence system against attack from viruses, bacteria and other harmful organisms

Incidence – the number of new infections per year in a given population

Informed consent – when a person agrees voluntarily to be tested after they have fully understood what the test involves and what the result may mean

Mandatory testing – when a person is tested without being given a choice

Opportunistic infections – common infections in people whose immune system is damaged, that do not usually affect people with a healthy immune system

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) – a test that can detect the viral genetic material of HIV

Prevalence – the percentage of a population that has a particular disease at a particular point in time

Prophylaxis – measures taken to prevent a disease or illness

Rapid assays or tests – HIV tests that can be performed in less than 10 minutes

Reagent – an agent capable of producing a chemical reaction

Routine testing – where people are tested as a matter of course, sometimes without their knowledge, unless they specifically refuse testing

Screening – systematic testing of particular groups of people, or of donated blood, tissue and organs before use in transfusions or transplants

Sensitivity – the likelihood (expressed as a percentage) that a test result will be positive when antibodies to HIV are present

Seronegative – when a blood sample has been tested for HIV and shows no antibodies to HIV

Seropositive – when a blood sample has been tested for HIV, and the result has been confirmed, and shows antibodies to HIV

Seroprevalence – the percentage of a population infected with HIV

Serostatus (HIV status) – the status of a person’s blood – whether the blood has antibodies to HIV (seropositive) or not (seronegative)

Serum – the part of the blood that contains antibodies

Simple assays or tests – HIV tests that can be performed in 30 minutes to 2 hours

Specificity – the likelihood (expressed as a percentage) that a test result will be negative if HIV antibodies are not present

Supplementary test – a test used to confirm an initial positive diagnosis of HIV infection

Surveillance – anonymous unlinked testing of specific groups of people to detect levels of HIV infection in a population. Surveillance is normally used to identify trends in the epidemic and to plan allocation of resources.

Testing – refers in this publication to testing for HIV

Viral culture – a test that detects the virus itself, by trying to culture (grow) the virus from a blood sample

Voluntary testing – HIV testing of a person who has given informed consent

Western blot – a type of supplementary test used to confirm a diagnosis of HIV, usually when the results of screening are indeterminate (unclear)

Window period – the time between a person being infected with HIV and their body producing enough HIV antibodies for a test to detect