PART 4: HOW TO PROVIDE HIV TEST RESULTS

Positive test results must be given in person.

Preliminary positives must be confirmed.

A positive preliminary test and negative Western Blot should be followed with plasma HIV RNA testing to rule out acute infection.

When an individual receives a positive test result, providers are required by law to refer the individual to treatment and supportive services.
RAPID AND ELISA: NEGATIVE

What it Means

This test did not find HIV antibodies in the blood. While this result most likely means a patient does not have HIV, this test cannot detect recent infection (i.e. exposure that occurred in the past 3 months).

Next Steps

If the patient has engaged in high risk activities in the past three months, have them retested in three months.

If acute HIV suspected, order plasma HIV RNA test.

What to Say

If no high risk behavior:

“The results are negative. This almost always means you do not have HIV. No further testing is needed unless you think you have been exposed in the past three months. What questions do you have about staying HIV negative?”

If high risk behavior:

“A negative test means you do not have HIV infection; however the test may not show recent infection within the past 3 months. To be certain that you do not have HIV, I recommend getting another test 3 months after your last exposure. Can I help you figure out when that would be? We can make an appointment for you based on that.”

If acute HIV suspected:

“Because of your symptoms, I’m going to use another way to detect whether HIV is present. This test looks for the HIV virus in your blood and is better at finding a recent infection.”
RAPID AND ELISA: INDETERMINATE

What it Means
An indeterminate test means that it cannot be determined from the results whether the patient is HIV positive or negative.

Next Steps
Offer to test again.
If acute HIV suspected, order plasma HIV RNA test.

What to Say
“This test was neither positive nor negative. This happens sometimes and could result for a number of reasons. We are going to test again to try to get a clearer answer.”

If acute HIV suspected:
“Because of your symptoms, I’m going to use another way to detect whether HIV is present. This test looks for the HIV virus in your blood and is better at finding a recent infection.”
RAPID AND ELISA: POSITIVE

What it Means

The test detected HIV antibodies in the blood. This is a preliminary positive test and an indication the patient has HIV. In order to establish a confirmed positive, a confirmatory test needs to be conducted, such as a Western Blot. In the case of a positive ELISA, the lab should conduct this confirmatory test automatically. If the result is from a rapid test, a confirmatory test needs to be ordered. A confirmatory test does not occur automatically with a rapid test.

Next Steps

With positive rapid test, order confirmatory test; draw blood if needed
With positive ELISA, laboratory will automatically perform confirmatory test
Inform patient of results in person in a private area
Give patient time to react to initial news
Emphasize confirmation is needed
Emphasize HIV is treatable

For pregnant patients:
Connect with HIV provider
Start combination ART treatment as soon as possible
What to Say

"Your preliminary test result was positive. This means you probably have HIV.

We won’t know for sure if you are infected with HIV until we get the results from your confirmatory test. However, it is very likely (99%) that that test will be also be positive. It will take about 1-2 weeks to receive these results.

It is important to return for the results of this test."

“This is a serious infection, but people today are living longer healthier lives with medication that can keep the immune system strong. It is a good thing to know; this can get you on the path to treatment. HIV is treatable. Knowing you have HIV can help you take precautions to prevent passing it to others."

“There are all kinds of support available and we will help connect you to services that can help you through this."

“How are you feeling? What are your questions?"

“What will you do after you leave here? Who will you talk to about this?"

For pregnant patients:

“Your preliminary HIV screening result was positive. You may have HIV infection. We need to do a second (or confirmatory) test, but it is important to start medication to reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby while we wait for the result."

If appropriate: “It is important to delay breast-feeding until we have the second test result.”
WESTERN BLOT: NEGATIVE

What a Negative Western Blot Means

This test did not detect HIV antibodies in the blood and most likely indicates original antibody results were false positive. This test cannot detect infection that has occurred in the last 12 weeks.

Next Steps

If no signs, symptoms or risk factors for HIV, share negative results with patient.

If acute HIV infection suspected, order plasma HIV RNA or retest in 6 weeks.

What to Say

If no signs, symptoms:

“The second test came back negative. No further testing is needed unless you think you may have been exposed in the past three months. We can test again in six weeks to make certain if you would like.”

If acute HIV is suspected:

“The second test was negative, but this test can’t always detect early infection. Because of your symptoms, we are going to order another test that works a different way to detect the virus.”
WESTERN BLOT: INDETERMINATE

What an Indeterminate Western Blot Means

An indeterminate test means that it cannot be determined from the results whether the patient is HIV positive or negative.

Next Steps

Repeat test in 6 weeks.

If acute HIV infection suspected, order plasma HIV RNA test

What to Say

“These test results were indeterminate. That means we could not tell from this test whether you have HIV or not. We will need to retest in 6 weeks. Let’s schedule an appointment.”

If acute HIV is suspected:

“These results are indeterminate. That means the test does not indicate whether you have HIV or not. Because of your symptoms, I’m going to use another way to detect whether HIV is present. This test looks for the HIV virus in your blood and is better at finding a recent infection.”
WESTERN BLOT: POSITIVE

What a Positive Western Blot Means
In combination with a positive rapid or ELISA test, a positive confirmatory test indicates infection with HIV. It does not indicate the stage of disease.

Next Steps
Link Patient to HIV Primary Care
If the patient agrees to treatment, you are required by law to refer the patient to care. There are several Baltimore City treatment and case management centers that provide medical care and case management services for HIV and AIDS patients (See HIV Treatment Providers list in next section).

Provide Counseling
» Learning to Cope
Discuss ways to handle the emotional consequences of learning about a positive test result.

» HIV is a Manageable Disease
Assure the patient that, with good medical care and patient adherence, people with HIV stay healthier and live longer.

» Risk Reduction
Discuss how to prevent the spread of HIV to others.

» Partner Notification
Urge patients to notify their partners. See Partner Notification Options in the next section.
What to Say

In a private area alone with the patient (unless patient requests presence of another person):

“These tests confirm that you have HIV infection.”

Allow patient time to react. Shock and disorientation are common reactions. Remain calm and nonjudgmental. Pay attention to the placement of chairs. Ensure that both you and client have access to a door.

If appropriate, say “Tell me about your reaction. Is this a surprise or something you were expecting?”

Even if patient does not show signs of shock or disorientation, do not try to give too much information at once. Adjust accordingly if concern exists that the patient will not return for more information. Key next steps may need to be written down and supportive material offered. Have up-to-date information on hand.

Offer reassurance that HIV does not mean AIDS and it is not a death sentence:

“People with HIV who receive the care they need can live long and healthy lives. With proper treatment you can as well. Even if you don’t feel sick now, starting treatment right away will help you in the long run.”

“What questions do you have now?”
“It is normal to have more questions as time passes. Please make sure you ask your health care providers.”

“There are all kinds of services and support in Baltimore to help you through this. I will help link you with someone who can help you take advantage of these resources.”

Talk to the patient about notification and reporting. (see Notification in the next section)

“It will be important to notify sex partners so they can get tested, too. I always encourage my patients to consider working with the Health Department. They can notify your partners without disclosing your identity. Someone from the Health Department should be contacting you shortly.”

“The results of these tests will be kept confidential. According to the law, we have to report any confirmed HIV cases to the Health Department”

Get the patient connected to care; the more active referral the better for the patient:

- Make a phone call to make an appointment for the patient while in the office.
- If you are near a treatment center, see if a case manager can help escort the patient there to get started.

The next section guides you through the steps of connecting an HIV+ patient to care.
PLASMA HIV RNA: UNDETECTABLE

What it Means

No copies of the HIV virus were detectable in the blood. While the results most likely mean the person does not have HIV, the test can not detect virus levels in the first days of exposure.

Next Steps

Share results with patient

Offer antibody retest for concerned patients

For patients with high risk behaviors: Retest with antibody test (rapid or ELISA) in 4-12 weeks

What to Say

**For patients with no risk factors and negative antibody test:**

“This test did not detect any virus in your blood. Most likely, this means you do not have HIV. To be sure, we can schedule another appointment to test for antibodies in 4-12 weeks. Would you like to schedule an appointment?”

**For patients with high risk behaviors:**

“This test did not detect any virus in your blood. Because you may have been recently exposed, I recommend another test in 4-12 weeks. When is a good time to come back in?”
PLASMA HIV RNA: POSITIVE

What it Means

A high viral load has been detected. In combination with a negative or indeterminate HIV antibody test (e.g. Rapid or ELISA), the positive test is indicative of acute (recent) HIV infection.

Next Steps

Diagnose acute HIV infection
Inform patient of results in person in a private area
Help connect to treatment/ offer treatment for all non-pregnant patients
Follow up with HIV antibody tests at 3 and 6 months

For pregnant patients:
Connect with HIV provider
Start combination ART treatment as soon as possible
What to Say

“ The test results indicate that you are in the early stages of HIV infection. We will know for sure in a few weeks when we can test for other signs. Most likely you have HIV.”

“Tell me about your reaction. Is this a surprise?”

“With knowing this early, we are in a good position to treat and manage HIV. With early diagnosis, people can take better care of their health and may have more treatment options.”

“I am going to connect you with an HIV expert and case manager today so we can figure out the best options moving forward.”

“Finally, with early HIV infection, you are highly infectious. It is in the phase of HIV that it is easiest to pass the virus to others. Every step you can take to limit transmission (abstaining from sex, using condoms) will help.”

For pregnant patients:

“These test results indicate that you are in the early stages of HIV. We will know more in a few weeks with additional tests. It is good that we caught it so early. It is important to start medication to reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby while we wait for the result.”

If appropriate: “It is important to delay breast-feeding until we have the second test result.”
**HIV 1/2 AG/AB: NONREACTIVE**

**What it Means**

The patient is Negative for HIV-1 antigen and HIV-1/HIV-2 antibodies. There is no evidence of infection.

**Next Steps**

Share results with patient.

If concerned about acute HIV infection based on symptoms: Test for HIV-1 RNA to detect HIV viral load.

**What to Say**

For patients with no risk factors:

“Your test was non-reactive. This means you do not have HIV. No further testing is required unless your risk factors and behavior changes.”

If acute HIV suspected:

“This test did not detect HIV, but because of your symptoms, I’m going to use another way to detect whether HIV is present. This test looks for the HIV virus in your blood.”

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**HIV 1/2 AG/AB: POSITIVE**

**What it Means**

The patient is positive for HIV-1 antibodies, HIV-2 antibodies or for HIV-1 p24 antigen.

**Next Steps**

Diagnose acute HIV infection.

Inform patient of results in person.

Link patient to treatment.

Report test results to Local Health Department.

**What to Say**

“The test results indicate that you are in an acute stage of HIV infection. This means that you are in the early stages of HIV infection.”

“People with HIV who receive care can live long healthy lives. I am going to connect you with an HIV expert who will help you with treatment and care.”

“It is important to know that you are highly infectious and can pass the virus to others very easily. Taking steps to limit transmission to others will help.”

“How are you feeling? What are your questions?”

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**Reference**


Provider Resource Guide