

## 4

## HIV COUNSELLING AND TESTING (HCT)

### Key points:

1. Everyone needs to know their HIV status.
2. Test regularly.
3. Get treatment early.
4. Stay negative.
5. Protect yourself. Protect others.

In South Africa we have more people living with HIV than any other country in the world. But very few South Africans know their HIV status. This is a serious problem. We know that HIV is spread through unprotected sex. We also know that after becoming HIV-positive you do not get sick immediately. This means that you can spread HIV for many years before you come to know your HIV status. Now that ARVs are available in public clinics it means that we can live positively with HIV. Everyone should know their status so that they can look

after their own health and protect other people in their lives. In 2010, the South African government rolled out their **HCT Campaign** - encouraging all South Africans to test for HIV so that we can all know our status and take steps to remain HIV negative if we test negative, and to seek treatment, care and support if we test HIV positive. The campaign slogans speak to the need to for all of us to take responsibility for our health. "I am responsible", "We are responsible", "South Africa is taking responsibility".





## ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

The aim of this chapter is to show the importance of testing for HIV and what is involved in the process.

### This chapter covers:

- Why test for HIV?
- Pre-test counselling and your HCT rights
- Who should go for HCT?
- HIV tests
- Post-test counselling



**Welcome to Chapter 4** of the Health Literacy Manual where we will be talking about HCT – HIV Counselling and Testing. In this chapter we will learn why HIV testing is important. It doesn't matter if you test HIV positive or HIV negative, knowing your status is very important. If you test positive, knowing your status can help you get better health care and to access treatment at the right time. This will mean that your quality of life is much better. It will also mean that you need to protect your sexual partners and always practice safer sex, just like HIV negative people. If you are married or in a relationship, it is important that you encourage your partner to test as well, so that they can also access the same advantage as you when it comes to knowing about their health.

In 2010, the South African government rolled out their **HCT Campaign** - encouraging all South Africans to test for HIV so that we can all know our status and take steps to remain HIV negative if we test negative, and to seek treatment, care and support if we test HIV positive.

HIV Counselling and Testing will be offered **routinely** by healthcare workers when you visit any health facility for any reason. You still have the right to choose to be tested or not, and you still need to have counselling before and after the test. By having the healthcare worker offer the test to you as part of their normal role in caring for your health, means they will be able to explain the importance of knowing your HIV status and that testing regularly for HIV should be part of everyone's normal health seeking behaviour.

If you test HIV negative, you will need to focus on staying negative and reducing your risks and always practicing safer sex. You will need to think about why you came to test in the first place and how you will make sure that you don't put yourself at risk again. It is always good to test regularly if you are sexually active. If you are thinking of starting a new sexual relationship, why don't both you and your partner go for HCT?

## Why test for HIV?

Episode 3, Chapter 1



The first step for all of us learning more about HIV is to find out our own status. The way we do this is through HIV Counselling and Testing, or HCT. HCT is not just going for a blood test. HCT is also where we get important information about how to live with HIV, whether or not we are positive ourselves. Remember, because nearly 20% of adults in South Africa are HIV positive, HIV affects all of us who are sexually active. This seems to be most of us!

If you are HIV negative it's important that you use protection every time you have sex to make sure you stay negative. If you think you have been exposed to the virus it's important that you go for testing. We are all human and sometimes we make mistakes. Maybe you didn't use a condom the last time you had sex. Go to the clinic and get tested. Don't let that one mistake mean that you stop using protection. Test regularly and keep using condoms.

If you test HIV positive, you can still lead a normal life and look forward to all the things in your future, such as having a family, educating your children and growing older. Now that we have ARVs we can live healthy lives but we need to learn how to manage our HIV infection and take good care of ourselves. If you test positive, you should also have a CD4 count test. We have talked about a CD4 count before. It helps to tell how healthy your immune system is and when to start ARVs. It is very important that you learn what your CD4 count is and start to become treatment literate. Apart from looking after your own health, you need to think about protecting your sexual partner from HIV infection. Use a condom every time you have sex.



### DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

**1. What is the first thing you should do if you are finding out about HIV?**

You should find out your own HIV status.

**2. What can you do to protect yourself from HIV infection?**

You can use a condom or a female condom to protect yourself from HIV infection.

**3. If you test HIV positive, what other test should you also have?**

If you test HIV positive you should also have a CD4 count test.

**Know your status,  
Test for HIV**

# Pre-test counselling and your HCT rights



What can you expect if you go for HCT? Remember that we noted at the beginning of this chapter that the South African government launched an HCT campaign in 2010, encouraging all South Africans to test for HIV and know their status. HCT will be routinely offered if you attend a health facility. Routine offer means that the doctor or nurse you are consulting will always offer you an HIV test, even if you are not consulting them specifically about HIV. For example, you may go to hospital or to see the doctor for a broken arm, and you will be offered an HIV test.



*Pre-test counselling helps you to learn more about HIV and testing for HIV.*

You still need to understand your rights and HCT. Even though HCT will be routinely offered, you still must receive counselling before and after your test.

No-one can force you to go for a test. If you are older than 14 you do not need your parents' consent to have an HIV test. No-one can discriminate against if you are HIV positive. No-one can test you if they plan to use the test result against you. When you go for testing, the whole process should be private and confidential, and the counsellor should treat you with respect and without being judgmental. Only you have the right to disclose your status to your family, partner, employer and other people in your life. We will talk about your rights in more detail later in the series.

During pre-test counselling the HCT counsellor will explain the whole procedure to you. They should find out what you know about HIV, and explain the test. They should ask about your sexual behaviour and possible exposure to HIV. They'll tell you the consequences of the test - what it will mean if you're positive and what it will mean if you're negative. You don't have to give permission for the blood test until you understand the whole procedure. You should always feel free to ask questions.

After the pre-test counselling you can decide whether or not to go ahead and be tested for HIV. Your counsellor might also be a trained health care worker who can take your blood for the HIV test. If not, your counsellor will take you to a health care worker who will then take a blood sample. They do not need to take blood out of your vein, but will prick the tip of your finger to get a little blood to test for HIV. Only after you have given your informed consent can an HIV test be done. Informed consent means that you give your permission based on understanding what you are giving permission for.



*When you decide to take an HIV test you need to sign to show that you give your informed consent.*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

**1. What does HCT stand for?**

HCT stands for HIV Counselling and Testing.

**2. Can someone like an employer make you have an HIV test?**

No. No-one can force you to have an HIV test.

**3. How old do you have to be to no longer need your parent's consent to have an HIV test?**

If you are 14 years or older you do not need your parents' consent to have an HIV test.

**4. What information should you get when you go for pre-test counselling?**

You should be asked what you know about HIV and told what HIV/AIDS is and what it means for your health. You should also be told how an HIV test works and what it will mean if you test either HIV positive or HIV negative.

**5. After pre-test counselling do you have to have an HIV test?**

No. After the pre-test you can decide whether or not you want to be tested for HIV.



## WORKBOOK NOTES

Four sets of horizontal dashed lines for writing notes.



# Who should go for HCT?

Who should go for an HIV test? **Everyone** should know their HIV status. As we know, HIV is transmitted in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. So if you've ever had sex without a condom, or sex where the condom failed, or if you've been exposed to somebody's blood without protection, you should find out your HIV status by going for HCT. People who are at most risk of HIV infection in South Africa are those who have had unprotected vaginal or anal sex. You are also at risk if you have been exposed to someone else's blood, such as in a car accident. If you are a drug user who has shared needles you are also at high risk. If you are HIV positive and give birth to a child without access to PMTCT (Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission), your child is at risk of being exposed to HIV during labour and you should take your child for an HIV test. Children who have been breast-fed by an HIV positive person are also at risk of getting HIV.

If you have an STI (sexually transmitted infection) you should test for HIV. This is because if you have an STI it means that you are having unprotected sex and are at risk of HIV infection. Another reason is that if you or your sexual partner has an STI, your chances of passing on or getting HIV are much higher. We already know that HIV can be found in semen and vaginal fluid. Many STIs have a discharge which has an even higher amount of HIV and is very infectious. Other STIs make small cuts in the skin and so it is easy for HIV to enter your body. We will talk about this in more detail later in the series. It is very important that you always get treatment for STIs as soon as notice you have one. Early treatment is best.

If you have TB you should also test for HIV and if you are HIV positive you should test for TB. The reason for this is that TB is 1 of the most common opportunistic infections HIV positive people get. We have already talked about opportunistic infections and how as your immune system gets weaker, you get more infections more easily. TB is also very common in South Africa generally. TB is responsible for more deaths than any other opportunistic infection.

If you have been hospitalised recently you should also have an HIV test. If you have been so sick that you needed to go to hospital, it is good to know your HIV status and also your CD4 count. If you test positive and your CD4 count is low you might need to start ARVs. It is better to test early and know your status before you get too sick.



*It doesn't matter who you are, everyone should have an HIV test.*



*Miners are at increased risk of getting TB because of their working and living conditions.*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

### 1. Who is most at risk of having HIV?

Anyone who has had unprotected sex is at risk of having HIV.

### 2. If you are pregnant why is it a good idea to have an HIV test?

If you are pregnant it is good to know if you are HIV positive so that if need be you can access PMTCT.

### 3. If you have an STI, why is it a good idea to have an HIV test?

If you have an STI it means that you are having unprotected sex and so you are at risk of HIV infection. STIs also increase your chances of getting and passing on HIV.

### 4. If you have TB, why should you have an HIV test?

TB is 1 of the most common opportunistic infections so it is a good idea to check if you are HIV positive if you have TB.



## WORKBOOK NOTES

Get tested,  
get treated

# Testing for HIV infection



There are different kinds of HIV tests. As we have said before, when you go for an HIV test, most tests look for HIV antibodies. You will remember that after first being infected with HIV, it takes your immune system a few weeks (usually up to 12 weeks) to react and to produce HIV antibodies. The time before you have HIV antibodies is called the 'window period', because you have HIV in your body but the tests for antibodies will test negative. This is why you should return after about 3 months to test again. At first, the most common test to be used was the ELISA test and it took quite a long time to get your results. You had to give your blood and then come back after 1 or 2 weeks. This was because the clinic had to send your blood to a laboratory where they could do the ELISA test.

Nowadays clinics and places that offer HIV tests use the Rapid test. Rapid tests are quick and you get your results after only 15 minutes. All that is needed is for the health care worker to prick the tip of your finger and squeeze a drop of blood into the test kit. Sometimes the person who counselled you is also a health care worker and so can test you as well. If not, the counsellor will stay with you until you receive your results. HCT is always done in private in a room with only you and the counsellor. The health care worker will wear surgical gloves to prevent any accidental exposure to HIV. After the test the health care worker will also put everything that came into contact with the blood, such as the needle and the test in a special bin that is used for things like needles and dirty bandages etc.

We still do the ELISA test, but only when someone has 2 different test results from a Rapid test. For example, if someone comes for a Rapid test and they test positive, the counsellor will do another test to check. If this second test is negative then you need to have an ELISA test to check what your status is. This will mean that your blood will have to be sent to a laboratory and takes between 5 days to 2 weeks for your test results to come back. If you test negative, the counsellor will not do a second test unless you ask for it.

**If you test HIV negative, you may be in the window period. Test again in 3 months**



The health worker will need to prick your finger to get blood for an HIV test.



The health worker will then put a drop of your blood in the test kit.

## The advantages of a Rapid HIV test are:

1. Rapid tests are less expensive than the ELISA test.
2. People can get pre and post counselling as well as their results in 1 visit.
3. Results are given immediately so HIV positive people can get health care quicker.
4. Rapid tests are easy to use and you don't need a laboratory.
5. People get their results at the same time and cannot be lost to follow up.



Here we can see what a rapid test looks like.



Here we can see a rapid test.





## DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

**1. What are the 2 common HIV tests you can have?**

There is the ELISA test and the Rapid test.

**2. What is the biggest advantage of the Rapid HIV test?**

The biggest advantage is that people get their results in about 20 minutes.

**3. What are other advantages to the Rapid test?**

The Rapid test is cheaper, easier to use and you don't need a laboratory to do it.



## WORKBOOK NOTES

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# Post-test counselling



You will get post-test counselling if you test negative or positive. In post-test counselling, the counsellor will find out how you're feeling about the results of the test. They will listen to what you say and try and encourage you to talk about how you feel about your test results. If you test HIV positive, they will also advise you on what you should do next. The HCT counsellor will be your first line of support in dealing with your reaction to the test. Remember that they are trained to counsel you and give you support. Ask them as many questions as you like. You don't have to be ashamed or embarrassed by how you react.

The counsellor will also talk to you about practical things like seeking ongoing support. They might recommend a support group that you can join where HIV positive people talk about how to live positively with HIV. The counsellor will also talk about disclosure to your partner and family. You will be able to discuss the advantages and possible disadvantages of disclosing your status and talk about ways you can disclose that are best for you. Remember that disclosure is a personal decision. But based on the experience of many other HIV positive people, living openly with your status is usually better for you and your health.

The counsellor will talk about living with HIV and some of the things you should know about healthy living, such as eating plenty of vegetables, using a condom every time you have sex and not drinking alcohol. They will also explain what ARVs are and when you need to start them. You will probably need to have a CD4 count done so that you know when to start ARVs. After testing HIV positive you will need to have a CD4 count test every 6 months to monitor your health. It is very important that you get treatment early and don't wait until you are sick before you start.

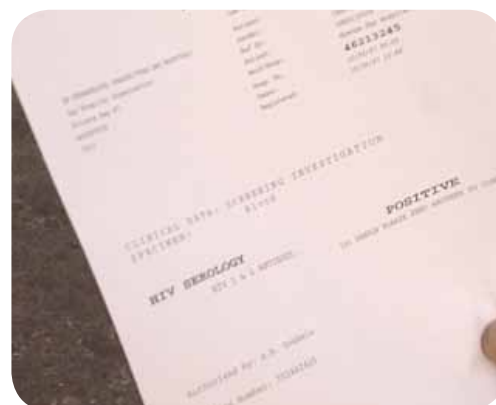
If you have tested in a place far away from your local clinic, you might also want the counsellor to write you a letter for other clinics where your HIV positive status is recorded. But you will also have to sign this letter to show that you have given the counsellor permission to share knowledge of your status with someone else. The counsellor is not allowed to tell anyone your HIV status. Only you can disclose your HIV status.

If you test negative, the counsellor will advise you to use protection every time you have sex. They will also encourage you to stay negative and to return for regular testing so that you know your status and stay negative. The counsellor will talk about why you decided to come for a test and discuss ways that you can make sure that you stay negative and don't put yourself at risk again.

As explained at the beginning of the chapter, HCT will be **routinely offered** when you visit a health facility. This is especially important when women go to the antenatal clinic. All pregnant women should be offered an HIV test. The reason for this is that if you are pregnant you must be having unprotected sex. If you are pregnant you can also pass on HIV to your child so it is important that you know your status and if you test positive you can use PMTCT to help prevent infecting your baby. It is up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take the HIV test. If you decide to have an HIV test you will receive pre and post test counselling.



*In post-test counselling, the counsellor will talk to you about ways of getting ongoing support.*



*In post-test counselling the counsellor will give you support and advice.*

You may not know many people who have gone for HCT, but it's very important. In countries like Uganda, where society is far more open about HIV, people routinely go for HCT, as often as every 6 months. Each of us needs to lead by example and go for testing. It's okay to be scared, but if you test you can get support, get empowered with knowledge, live much longer and suffer far less.

**Personal Story:**

Tumi Moleko decided to go for an HIV test. She said that she was a bit nervous - the last time she was tested was in 2006. Tumi believes it is better to know your status and that is why she got tested. Let's hear what Tumi and Francinah have to say....

**Francinah:** "Come take a seat. I'm Francinah, I'll explain a bit about the process of HCT. The process of counselling and testing takes about 40 minutes. You start with pre-test counselling and that takes about 15 minutes. From there you go to the lab where they take your blood for the test. After that you wait for 15 minutes for the results. Once your results are available, a counsellor will call you into the counselling room for post-test counselling and then show you results. Don't be afraid to ask questions and remember - everything is confidential. This is the waiting area. You can take a seat; a counsellor will be with you shortly."

**Tumi:** "During the pre-testing counselling, they asked if I had been tested before and what the results were. They also asked how I have been behaving since and about my sexual history. They counselled me about what a positive or negative result means. They also told me about the 3-month window period. After the actual test, they gave me the results, in post-test counselling. They told me what it means. They also said I should come again after 3 months, after the window period. And they gave me some advice on how to maintain my status. I feel relieved, very very relieved. At least *sengiyazi manje* I know where I am. I won't make stupid mistakes anymore."



**DISCUSSION POINTS**

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

**1. What are the most important things post-test counselling should do for someone who tests positive?**

If someone tests positive post-test counselling should give them support to help them accept their status. It should also assist them get all the medical help they need and refer them to a support group.

**2. What is the main message post-test counselling should give someone who tests negative?**

Post-test counselling should encourage people to stay negative and to always use a condom every time they have sex.



**WORKBOOK NOTES**

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### Congratulations for completing this chapter on HCT.

We have talked about why it is important to know your HIV status and all the steps you go through so that you can know what to expect. Knowing your HIV status is probably the most important investment you can make in your future. We have talked about how testing helps you to know your status early before you get sick. In this way you can look forward to a productive life and achieving all your goals. If you test negative, you have the opportunity to make sure you remain negative. Get tested. Get treated.



## BEFORE WE END OFF

Make sure all questions have been answered. It is important that you understand the following key points:

1. Everyone needs to know their HIV status.
2. Test regularly.
3. Get treatment early.
4. Stay negative.
5. Protect yourself. Protect others.



Encourage others to  
test for HIV

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## MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

Name : .....

Circle the correct answer for each question. You can only choose 1 answer for each question.

**1. Who needs to go for HCT?**

- a) Young people
- b) Prostitutes
- c) Married couples
- d) Everyone

**2. Which of the following is not a reason to go for an HIV test?**

- a) You are pregnant.
- b) Your boss says you have to.
- c) You have had unprotected sex.
- d) You helped someone who was bleeding and didn't have gloves.

**3. HIV Counselling and Testing includes all of these things except 1.**

- a) Pre-test counselling
- b) Compulsory testing
- c) HIV test
- d) Post-test counselling

**4. Which word does not describe HCT?**

- a) Public
- b) Private
- c) Confidential
- d) Professional

**5. If you test HIV positive, what other test should you have as soon as possible?**

- a) A diabetes test
- b) A CD4 count test
- c) A syphilis test
- d) A urine test

**6. Safer sex means:**

- a) You use a condom when you feel like it.
- b) You only use Durex condoms.
- c) You use a condom every time you have sex.
- d) You never use a condom.

**7. Pre-test counselling gives you information on:**

- a) TB
- b) HIV/AIDS
- c) STIs
- d) Diabetes

**8. Which of the following statements is true?**

- a) Only HIV positive people have to use condoms every time they have sex.
- b) Only HIV negative people have to use condoms every time they have sex.
- c) Everyone has to use condoms every time they have sex.
- d) No-one has to use condoms every time they have sex.

**9. Which of the following statements is true?**

- a) If you go for HCT, the nurse can tell you family your test results.
- b) If you go for HCT your HIV status is confidential.
- c) If you go for HCT you have to wait a month for your test results.
- d) If you go for HCT you are forced to tell everyone your HIV status.

**10. Which of the following statements is untrue?**

- a) Rapid tests mean that you get your results in about 20 minutes.
- b) People can get pre and post counselling when they go for HCT.
- c) If you test HIV positive you can never have sex again.
- d) If you test HIV negative you need to practice safer sex.





## WORKBOOK NOTES

A series of horizontal dashed orange lines spanning the width of the page, providing a template for handwritten notes.