

National HIV Self-Sampling Service: Frequently Asked Questions

Hertfordshire have joined a new nationally procured HIV home sampling service, supported by Public Health England. This document aims to address common questions in relation to the national HIV self-sampling service.

Why procure HIV self-sampling?

In the UK there are an estimated 107,800 people living with HIV of whom an estimated 26,100 (24%) are unaware of their infection. Undiagnosed HIV infections pose a major health risk for both the individual living with HIV, as delays in treatment will result in a worse prognosis; and for the public, as treatment for the positive individual can reduce the risk of onward transmission.

Although HIV late diagnosis rates in Hertfordshire are slightly above average, they have been reducing year on year for several years. The County Council recently introduced plans to reduce late diagnoses using best national guidance from Public Health England, NICE and other national experts. Reducing the numbers of people with undiagnosed infection through promotion of HIV testing is a key component of the current Hertfordshire Sexual Health Strategy (2014- 2019).

The procurement of a nation-wide HIV self-sampling service will be expected to offer major cost and quality benefits. HIV home-sampling will complement our commissioned sexual health and HIV service providers by offering an alternative service to those who either have never tested for HIV or wish to test more regularly.

What is a HIV self-sampling service and is there evidence to support this?

The HIV self-sampling service allows individuals to order a free self-sampling kit from www.freetesting.hiv, mailed to an address of their choice, and then return a self-taken blood sample to a laboratory for testing and results management.

Two national pilots, supported by Public Health England have been extremely successful, demonstrating the feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of such services. These findings concur with available literature, indicating that remote HIV sampling is an acceptable method of testing and therefore this is the model of service delivery that is being proposed.

What are the benefits of procuring HIV self-sampling collaboratively?

The procurement of a nation-wide HIV self-sampling service will be expected to offer major cost benefits. The three major areas where such a service would be expected to offer major cost savings are:

- **Earlier diagnosis:** There are significant cost-savings in earlier diagnosis of HIV through the promotion of HIV testing. A number of studies have reported much lower treatment and care costs for individuals who are diagnosed earlier rather

than later, due to less late-stage disease comorbidities, and consequently a reduced requirement for inpatient care.

- **Increased capacity:** A key component of the current HIV prevention strategy is to promote HIV testing and increased frequency of HIV testing (every three months for those at highest risk). This increase in testing need will be difficult to provide using only traditional services such as GUM clinics
- **Lower costs of an HIV test:** It is anticipated that a HIV self-samplings service will offer major costs saving over current tariffs and costs for an HIV test. Financial data from the PHE pilots of the home sampling service indicated that costs were significantly lower than current tariffs.

When does it start?

The service was officially be launched during HIV Testing Week (w/c 21st November 2015) and supported by local and national media coverage.

Who can access the service?

The service is for individuals aged 16 years and over residing in local authority areas who have commissioned the service.

The kits are available for free to those at higher risk of HIV infection in Hertfordshire, for example, e.g. men who have sex with men (MSM) and Black African heterosexuals. Those not eligible to access a kit will be encouraged to get tested at their local sexual health service (see contact information below)

Why is this initiative focusing upon high-risk populations?

Surveillance data continuously demonstrates the two populations most at-risk of acquiring a HIV infection in the UK are MSM and Black African heterosexuals.

The introduction of a home sampling service can still support local sexual health campaigns and interventions, to address the identified needs of those living in Hertfordshire.

What support will be provided to those who have a reactive result?

The provision of reactive results will be given by a trained and clinically competent advisory service. The patient will be required to take a confirmatory test, available from a sexual health service of their choice.

Standard operating procedures will be followed for issues that may arise when informing Service Users of their results including, but not limited to, child protection and safeguarding, A&E and sexual assault services.

Negative results will also include signposting to appropriate local sexual health services.

Will this affect footfall into local sexual health services?

HIV home-sampling will complement our commissioned sexual health and HIV service providers. We do not anticipate significant changes to footfall into local sexual health services. We will continue to monitor uptake of the service and work with our providers to respond accordingly.

Can HIV testing still be accessed from local sexual health services in Hertfordshire?

Yes - The contracted community provider of HIV testing is HertsAid and we would recommend anyone looking for information or support on HIV to contact them as we work with them to assure the quality of their service, and are satisfied that they have standards in place including for their HIV testing work. Equally our local NHS Sexual Health Services (Sexual Health Hertfordshire) also have processes and standards in place for HIV testing in clinic settings. Between them these organisations provide HIV testing services commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council which are consistent with national guidelines.

We do not endorse other organisations who may offer home-sampling services as we cannot at this time guarantee any of these organisations meet and comply with standards and guidelines expected of the national programme, including the clinical governance, safety and quality standards which will be a core part of the national programme.

For further information on the HIV Home Sampling Service please contact:

Public Health Hertfordshire – publichealth@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Hertfordshire Sexual Health and HIV Services

- **Sexual Health Hertfordshire**

Tel: 0300 008 5522

Website: www.clch.nhs.uk/sexualhealthhertfordshire

- **Herts Aid**

Tel: Ware Office: 01920 484 784

Watford Office: 01923 803 440

Website: www.hertsaid.co.uk