

IN THE KNOW



HIV TESTING INFORMATION FOR GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN

IN THE KNOW

Produced by Gay Health Network (GHN)

Sponsored by the Health Promotion Unit (HPU) in the Department of Health and Children, Republic of Ireland.

GHN would very much like to thank the following:

George from Johnny (Gay peer group)

Maurice Farrell for design

Stephen Myler for proofing

Christelle, Mayte and Corneliu for translations

GHN members, the medical consultants and others for their feedback.

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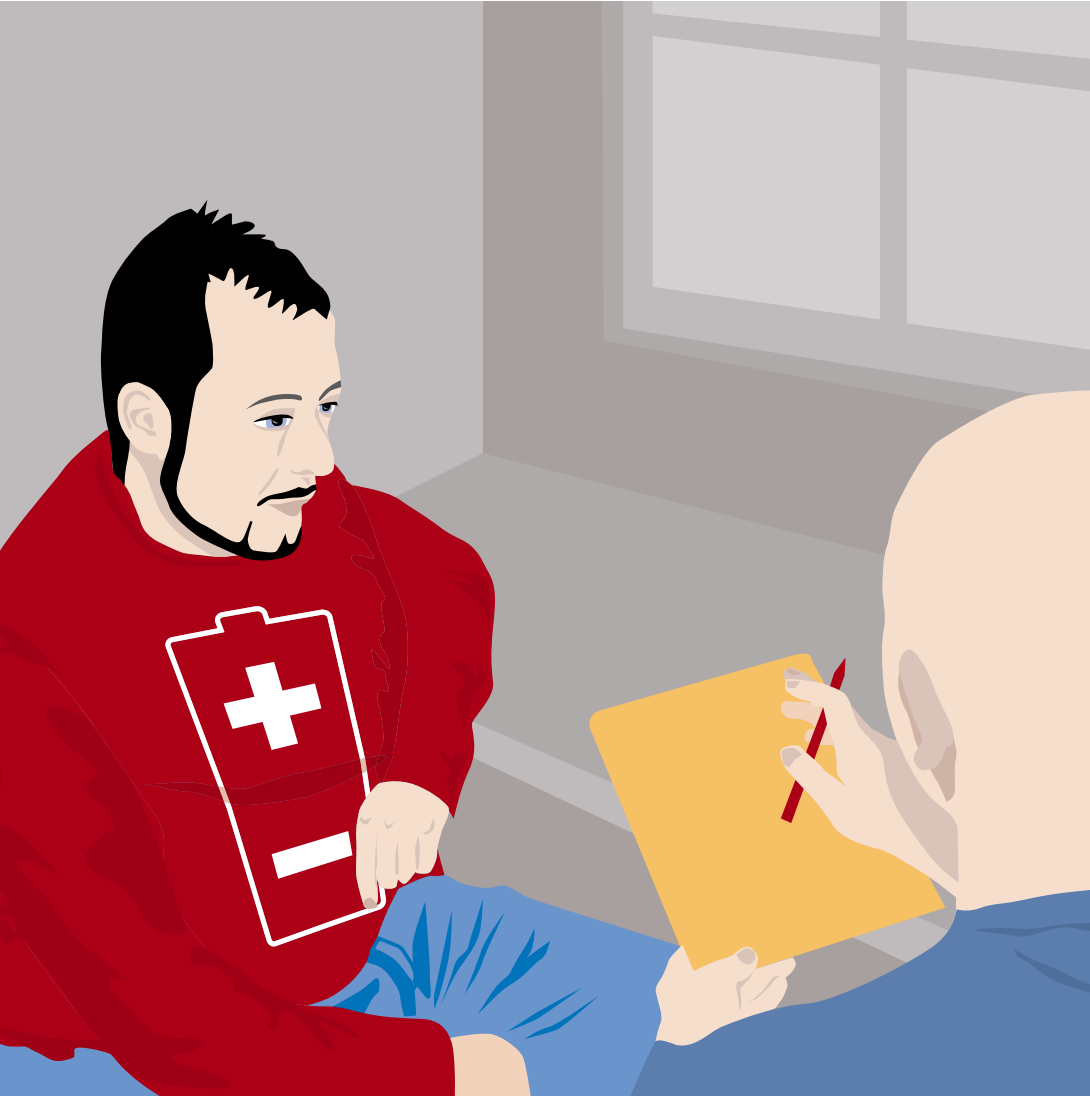
GHN 2/2004

Gay Health Network (GHN) was established in 1994 and is an all-Ireland Network of gay and bisexual men involved in HIV and sexual health from the statutory and voluntary sector. GHN is open to any gay or bisexual men involved in the area of HIV and sexual health in Ireland. For other publications visit our **website** www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

KNOW YOUR STATUS

HIV is a serious, long-term chronic illness; it affects your life greatly; medically, emotionally and, indeed socially, and may lead to AIDS. There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. Safer sex practices and not sharing drug-using equipment is the best way to prevent infection. But many of us have taken risks, made mistakes or assumed we or our sex partners didn't have HIV. Having a blood test is the only sure way to know if you have HIV. Gay Health Network (GHN) has produced this booklet to highlight some of the issues involved in HIV testing.

There can be many advantages in knowing your HIV status, but it's not a decision to be made lightly. We now believe it is time for gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men to consider having an HIV test. To know your status, especially if you are HIV positive, will help you to avail of early medical and emotional interventions, assist you in making appropriate life changes, thus assuring you will have a long and good quality of life, including a healthier sex life. If you are HIV negative, it can be a way to confirm your safer sex practices, or help you to plan for a safer and healthier sex life.



1 IN 2 HAVE NOT TESTED

1 in 2 Gay and Bisexual Men Have Not Tested

According to the GHN survey Vital Statistics Ireland, over 40% of men who have sex with men have not tested for HIV. With the developments in medical treatments, the advantages of testing have increased. If you have never tested for HIV, or if it has been a long time since you last tested, maybe it is time to test or retest.

Don't presume you or your sex partners are HIV negative

Take time to read this booklet. If you need more information or if you feel you would like to talk to someone about any concerns or worries you might have, contact one of the agencies listed at the back of this booklet.

Talk to someone before you decide to test and request pre-test counselling

All public sexual health clinics (STI/GUM Clinics) have professionals who are available to discuss the test with you. Some clinics have counsellors who will talk with you about all the issues or concerns you might have. This is called pre-test counselling (clinics are listed on the back of this booklet).

DON'T PRESUME

If you intend to have an HIV test somewhere that doesn't offer pre-test counselling, we would suggest that you talk with someone or contact a gay health group or an HIV/AIDS Helpline (listed on the back of this booklet) to discuss your own situation before you decide to test.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. When HIV enters the bloodstream it begins to attack the immune system. Your body then produces antibodies to fight off infection. Although these antibodies cannot destroy HIV, their presence is used to confirm HIV infection. HIV tests look for antibodies, not for the virus itself.

Over time, if left untreated, HIV greatly affects your health. Your immune system becomes so damaged that it can no longer fight off infections and cancers that don't usually cause problems. AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is the term used to describe these unusual symptoms or cancers in HIV positive people.

HIV TRANSMISSIONS

How does someone get infected with HIV?

HIV is transmitted in blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breast milk. In Ireland, having unprotected sex or sharing needles with an infected person are the two commonest ways in which people get HIV. If you have never shared needles, then this leaves sex as the main way of becoming infected. Having other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis or gonorrhoea can greatly increase the chances of becoming infected with HIV.

Anal Sex

If you have sex with someone who is infected, HIV can be passed through unprotected anal intercourse (fucking or being fucked without a condom), or if a condom is used and it bursts or slips off.

Oral sex

A small number of men have been infected with HIV through oral sex (cock sucking). HIV is passed on when a positive person cums in an HIV negative person's mouth. Having sores, ulcers, bleeding gums or another STI (in particular, syphilis) can increase the chances of catching HIV. The risk for oral sex is not as high as the risk for unprotected anal sex (fucking without a condom) but there is still a risk.

HIV IS NOT AIDS

Sex with Women

Men who are sexually active with women can pass on or get HIV through unprotected anal, vaginal or oral sex.

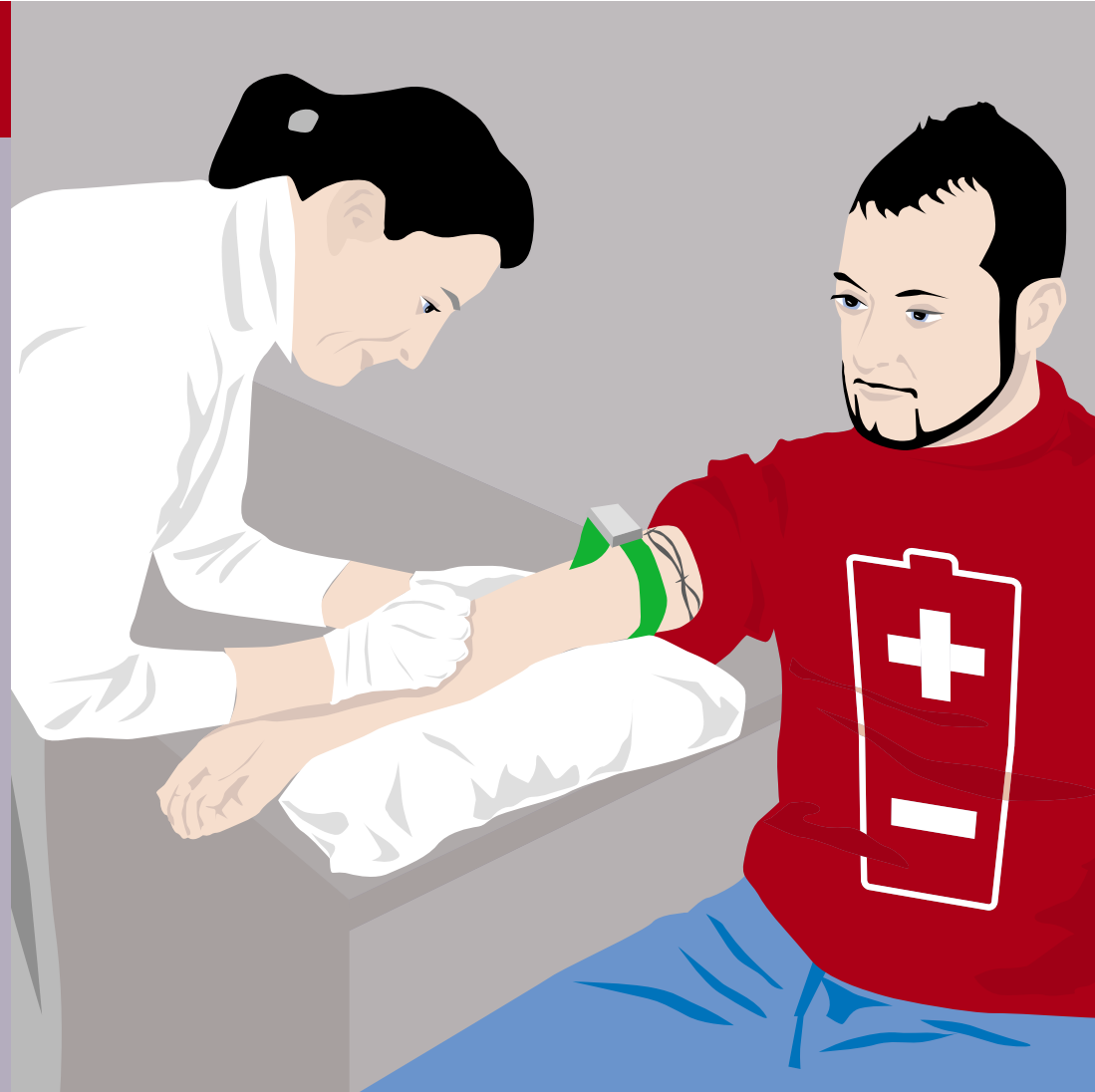
Sex Toys

Sharing sex toys such as vibrators or dildos can facilitate the spread of HIV. If you share sex toys, cover them with a condom before use (or change the condom between sharing). Always wash the sex toy thoroughly after use.

Blood Donations

You cannot get HIV by giving blood. In Ireland, there is no risk in receiving blood or blood products as all donated blood is screened.

Safer Sex can prevent HIV



TEST AT A CLINIC

What is an HIV test?

Usually this involves taking a small amount of blood from your arm. The test looks for antibodies to HIV in your blood. Antibodies are produced when your body detects an infection, like a virus. However, it can take up to three months for your body to produce enough HIV antibodies to give a positive test result.

We recommend you attend an STI/GUM clinic for a HIV test

You might want to test if:

- You fucked or were fucked without a condom
- You took cum in your mouth
- You had difficulties with a condom during sex (it tore or slipped off)
- You engaged in any form of sexual activity that involved drawing blood
- You shared sex toys
- You received blood or blood products before 1986
- You have shared needles
- You tested a long time ago

YOU WANT TO KNOW

- You are in a relationship and you and your partner want to stop using condoms.
- You want to father a child or donate sperm.
- You just want to be sure.

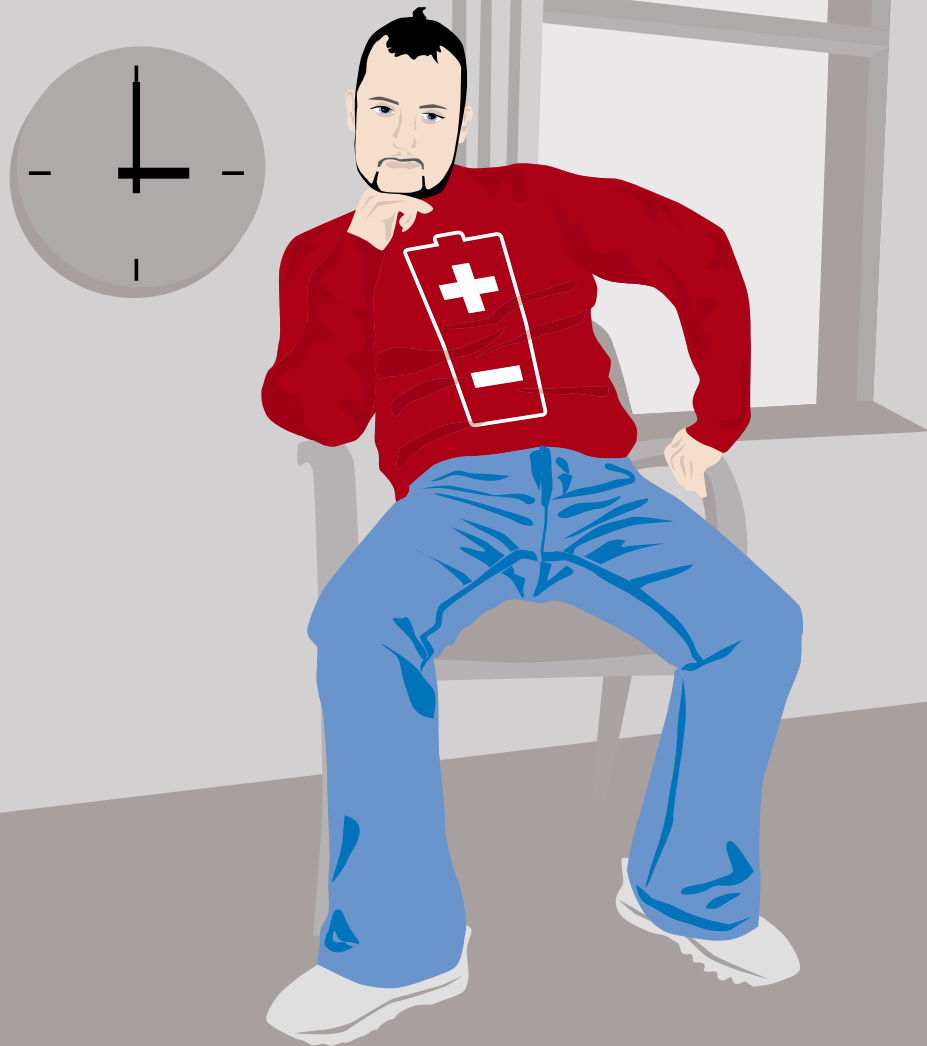
What if I'm negative?

A negative result means that the antibody to HIV was not identified in your blood. This can mean two things:

- You have not been infected with HIV.
- It is too soon after your last risk for the test to be conclusive. This is known as the 'window period'. To have a conclusive test, it's advisable to test at least 3 months after your last risk.

A negative result does not mean that you're immune to HIV. You could be infected in the future if you put yourself at risk. Have a look at other GHN publications or www.gayhealthnetwork.ie to learn more about protecting yourself from HIV in the future.

A negative result for you doesn't mean your partner is negative



WINDOW PERIOD

Why might I have to wait three months?

After someone has been infected with HIV, it can take up to three months for antibodies to HIV to develop. The test involves looking for these antibodies to HIV in your blood. If you test within three months of your last risk, you might get an HIV negative result, which in fact, may be incorrect. This period between the last risk and the development of antibodies to HIV is known as the 'window period.' With most people the HIV antibodies take three months to show and in very rare cases they can take six months to show up.

During this window period, you should continue practicing safer sex

What if I'm positive?

A positive HIV test result means that you have been infected with HIV, the virus which can cause AIDS. You will be referred to a specialised HIV centre for ongoing monitoring, and, if necessary, treatment for HIV. While waiting to see your new HIV specialist we advise you to consider psychological or peer support which will help you with whatever worries you may be having. It will also reassure you that you are not alone.

POSITIVE RESULTS

Currently, there is no cure for HIV. But don't despair. Things have now changed for the better. By treating HIV with special drugs before any symptoms of AIDS appear, it will alter the course of the disease, to improve and extend your life expectancy. These anti-viral drugs have given HIV positive people new hope.

Basically this means that, in a person who takes their anti-viral drugs as prescribed, the level of HIV (viral load) in the blood can be kept very low. This allows the immune system to be restored to almost normal levels.

Most newly diagnosed HIV positive gay and bisexual men don't need to start taking medication straight away. With good advice and support you may not need medical interventions for some years. Some men found out they were HIV positive when they were so ill that their treatment options were limited, making it too late to treat them effectively.

In some treatment centres you can avail of specialised psychological supports. You will also be informed of the nearest support organisations if you wish to use them. People who are trained to provide you with support will be aware of all the issues which might be going through your head.

UNCLEAR RESULTS

What if the result is unclear?

In a very rare number of tests, the initial assessment is unclear. It could mean that the antibodies to HIV are still developing, but equally, it can have nothing to do with HIV. Usually it has something to do with technical difficulties or some other problem with the blood. These uncertainties occur very rarely and are sorted out over a few weeks. You will be advised to have another test by the doctor some weeks later and you should be offered support by the counsellor. If there is none available contact one of the agencies listed in this booklet.

If you are HIV positive, it's better to find out sooner rather than later

What are the issues involved in having an HIV test?

There are many possible issues involved in having an HIV test. Some are easy to deal with, some are very difficult to deal with. Some of these could be:

- For those who are HIV negative, knowing this can put your mind at rest.
- If you are HIV negative you can continue planning a healthier sex life while protecting yourself and others.
- Knowing that you are HIV positive while still healthy can greatly increase your life expectancy and your options around treatment should you need medical interventions.
- If you know that you are HIV positive, you can plan for a healthier sex life while protecting yourself and others.
- HIV is a virus, not a moral judgement. Sadly, there is still a stigma associated with being HIV positive which can lead to difficulties with your partner, family, friends or in the workplace. Accessing professional or peer support can help you greatly.

- If you test HIV positive, it doesn't mean that your current sexual partners are positive too. But if you have had unprotected sex with them, it would be advisable that they are also given the opportunity to test.
- You may wish to tell any of your known previous sexual partners. Do seek support before you tell. HIV, by law, is not a notifiable disease.
- Insurance companies should not discriminate against you for having an HIV test. Many companies require applicants to test. However, if you are HIV positive you will have difficulties getting certain types of insurance and assurance. You might want to look for further advice on this and have a test at a clinic before seeking insurance.
- Some people would rather not know if they are HIV positive. They feel that they would not be able to cope if they knew that they were HIV positive. In reality, most men living with HIV with good support, advice and education cope well and enjoy a good quality of life, including a healthy sex life.

HIV and Worry

The thought of being HIV positive can cause a lot of worry for some gay and bisexual men. Sometimes you can become really worried, despite the fact that you did not put yourself at risk.

Do you:

- Go for HIV tests over and over again, even though you have been given negative results?
- Worry about having put yourself at risk, when you might not have done so?
- Find that worry is affecting your health, your relationships or other areas of your life?

Worry can be very distressing and can affect how you feel in both body and mind. Talking about your fears and worries with someone may be helpful. If you think you are worrying too much, it might be worth talking with a counsellor, gay health worker or contact a telephone helpline.



Where can I test?

Testing takes place at sexual health clinics throughout Ireland or at the Gay Men's Health Project in Dublin. We advise attending a sexual health clinic as you can avail of other sexual health screenings while there. At some clinics pre- and post-test counselling is available. Testing is free at all clinics, and it usually takes two weeks before you can collect your results. The various testing sites are listed at the back of this booklet.

Before you do it, make sure you are aware of the policies and procedures for HIV testing in the centre that you have chosen.

Some doctors, General Practitioners (GPs), also provide HIV testing, but your results will be noted in your medical records. Also, some GPs may not be familiar with pre- and post-test counselling. If your only option is to visit a GP, then instead of going to your own you could visit a GP not previously known to you. Talk with someone on the telephone or to a friend before you decide. The test is free, but GPs will charge you a consultation fee unless you have a medical card.

Home testing?

Rapid HIV or home testing kits are available in some countries. At the date of this publication, they have not been licensed for sale in Ireland. A negative result from these kits means the same as other negative tests. It is important to note that a positive result from such a kit should be confirmed in a specialist laboratory, since it may give a wrong reading. We recommend you do not test alone.

Is the test confidential?

If you have an HIV test in a specialised sexual health clinic, the test is confidential. The blood will be sent to the laboratory with some identifying information, such as a date of birth, initials and a medical chart number.

If you are HIV positive only the clinic or hospital will have your details and cannot give them to anyone else without your consent, although all positive cases are recorded for reports by use of special codes. You cannot be identified.

Is testing anonymous?

In Ireland it is not usually possible to have an anonymous HIV test. However, if you do use a false name and date of birth – it is really important that you remember the details you gave (write them down somewhere).

What is Informed Consent?

Informed Consent means you have a right to be fully informed about any medical procedure, to refuse it or to agree to it. You should be asked to read or to acknowledge a statement saying that you have been informed about the HIV antibody test procedure, you understand any implications, and that you consent to having it done.

New to Ireland?

Regardless of your legal status or where you are from you can get a free HIV test from any STI/GUM clinic. You can also have a free sexual health screen and treatment. Testing at the STI/GUM clinic is confidential and information about your visit cannot be accessed by anyone else.

"IN THE KNOW" is also available in Spanish, French and Romanian at www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

Vous venez d'arriver en Irlande?

Quel que soit votre statut légal et quel que soit l'endroit d'où vous venez, vous pouvez obtenir un test VIH gratuit de n'importe quelle clinique STI/GUM. Vous pouvez également bénéficier d'un dépistage et d'un traitement gratuit de santé sexuelle. Les tests effectués à la clinique STI/GUM sont confidentiels et personne ne peut avoir accès aux informations concernant votre visite. www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

¿Eres nuevo en Irlanda?

Sea cual sea tu nacionalidad o situación legal puedes hacerte la prueba del VIH gratuitamente en cualquier centro SM/GUM. También puedes hacerte un examen completo de ETS gratis y recibir tratamiento. Las pruebas son confidenciales y ninguna persona ajena tiene acceso a los informes de los pacientes. www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

Nou In Irlanda?

Nu conteaza daca sinteti legali sau ilegali sau din ce Tara proveniti puteti face gratis testul HIV[SIDA] la orice clinica STI/GUM. Puteti deasemeni sa faceti gratis toate testele de sanatate si tratamentele. Testindu-va la clinica STI/ GUM este strict confidential iar informatiile despre vizita voastra la clinica sint total interzise www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

TAKE THE TEST

So what will I do now?

Every person's situation is different — only you can make the decision after seriously considering your own. There are valid reasons why some people choose not to test. In light of treatments currently available, the Gay Health Network is promoting the HIV test because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

We hope reading this booklet helped you in some way. In the end it is for you to decide whether to test or retest, but before you do

Talk...Think...Talk...Think...Talk...Think.....Test



LISTINGS

Try not to be afraid or embarrassed in contacting a gay health agency, HIV/AIDS Helpline, gay switchboard or one of the other agencies listed below to discuss your own particular circumstances.

Gay & Bisexual Men's Health Services Ireland

The Rainbow Project

2 Union St, Belfast.

028 9031 9030 (048 from Rol)

37 Clarendon St, Derry.

028 7128 3030 (048 from Rol)

www.rainbow-project.com

Gay Men's Health Project

Outhouse, 105 Capel St, Dublin 1.

01 873 4952

www.gaymenshealthproject.ie

Southern Gay Men's Health Project

8 South Main St, Cork.

021 427 8470

www.gaymensproject.com

The First Tuesday Club

HIV+ Gay & Bisexual Men's Social Group

Open Heart House, 2 St Mary's Place, Dublin 7. 01 830 5000

www.openhearthouse.ie

LISTINGS

HIV Testing, Information and Support Listings

Notes:

TFA=Telephone For Appointment

DI=Drop-in

Ulster

STI/GUM Clinics

Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast (TFA).

028 906 34050 (048 from Rol)

Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry (TFA).

028 716 11269 (048 from Rol)

Causeway Hospital, Co. Derry (TFA).

028 703 46027 (048 from Rol)

Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry, Co. Down (TFA).

028 308 35000 ext. 2243

(048 from Rol)

HIV/AIDS Helplines

AIDS Helpline NI.

Freefone 0800 137 437

AIDS Help Donegal.

074 912 5500

HIV Support Centre

The Warehouse, 7 James St South, Belfast.

028 902 49268 (048 from Rol)

AIDS Help North West

Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.

074 912 5500

Gay Helplines

Gay Helpline Belfast.

028 903 22032 (048 from Rol)

Gay Information Derry.

028 712 63120 (048 from Rol)

LISTINGS

Munster

STI/GUM Clinics

Victoria Hospital, Cork (TFA).	021 496 6844
General Hospital, Tralee, Co. Kerry (TFA).	021 496 6844
Regional Hospital, Limerick (TFA).	061 482 382
General Hospital, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary (TFA).	061 482 382
General Hospital, Ennis, Co. Clare (TFA).	061 482 382
Regional Hospital, Waterford (TFA).	051 842 646
General Hospital, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (TFA).	051 842 646

HIV/AIDS Helplines/Supports

Sexual Health Helpline Cork.	021 427 6676
AIDS Helpline Limerick.	061 316 661
Red Ribbon Project	
Redwood House, 9 Cecil St, Limerick.	061 314 354
Alliance Centre Sexual Health	
16 Peters St, Cork.	021 427 5837

Gay Helplines

Gay Information Cork.	021 427 1087
Gay Switchboard Limerick	061 310 101
Rainbow Support Services	061 468 611
Gay Line South East, Waterford.	051 879 907

LISTINGS

Leinster

STI/GUM Clinics

GMHP Clinic	
19 Haddington Road, Dublin 4	
Tuesdays and Wednesdays pm (DI and TFA)	01 660 2189
www.gaymenshealthproject.ie	

St James's Hospital	
Dublin 8 (TFA).	01 416 2315/6

Mater Hospital	
Dublin 7 (TFA).	01 830 1122
General Hospital Carlow, Co. Carlow (TFA).	051 842 646

HIV Testing Only	
Baggot St Clinic, Dublin 4 (DI).	01 660 2189
Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9 (TFA).	01 809 3006

HIV/AIDS Helplines and Supports

HIV/Drugs Helpline	FreePhone, 1800 459 459
Dublin AIDS Alliance	
53 Parnell St, Dublin 1.	01 873 3799

LISTINGS

Open Heart House,
2 St Mary's Place, Dublin 7.

01 830 5000

Gay Helplines

Gay Switchboard Dublin.

01 872 1055

Connaught

STI/GUM Clinics

Regional Hospital, Galway (TFA).

091 525 200

General Hospital, Ballinasloe, Co. Galway (TFA).

090 964 8372

Regional Hospital, Sligo (TFA).

071 917 0473

General Hospital, Castlebar, Co. Mayo (TFA).

094 9021733

HIV/AIDS Helplines & Supports

AIDS Helpline Galway.

091 562 213

AIDS West, Augustine St, Galway.

091 566 266

Gay Helplines

Gay Line Galway.

091 566 134



IN THE KNOW



www.gayhealthnetwork.ie

Gay Health Network Ireland

c/o Outhouse, 105 Capel Street, Dublin 1

c/o The Rainbow Project, 2 Union Street, Belfast