

In-home HIV test available; may mask cases

Written by Stephanie Groves

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July is HIV/AIDS Awareness Month and there is no better time than now to get tested.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1.2 million people in the United States are living with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and one in five (18 percent) of those are not aware they are infected. Among HIV-positive people aged 13–24, only 41 percent have been diagnosed.

Recently, testing has been made much more convenient for those who do not want to go to a health department or their doctor and can afford to purchase an in-vitro diagnostic home-use test for HIV in oral fluid.

On July 3, 2012, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the OraQuick In-Home HIV Test, the first over-the-counter home-use rapid HIV test kit to detect the presence of antibodies to human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) and type 2 (HIV-2). HIV is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

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The in-home test kit is designed to allow individuals to collect an oral fluid sample by swabbing the upper and lower gums inside of their mouths, then place that sample into a developer vial and obtain test results within 20-40 minutes. Kits are available at Walgreen's in the pharmacy.

Van Wert County Health Department's STD (sexually transmitted disease) Clinic Nurse Linda Bissonette, RN, said that she administers the same test— OraQuick HIV Test—which is called the Rapid HIV Oral Test at the facility.

"The tests are simple," Bissonette stated. "People ages 18 and older can come to the Health Department and get one for free, unless they can pay a donation."

As of Sept. 30, 2012, Allen County reports 73 persons living with a diagnosis of HIV infection. Putnam and Van Wert Counties both report less than 10 individuals living with a diagnosis of HIV.

HIV testing is done on a walk-in basis on Mondays at the STD Clinic. Bissonette requests that people call the clinic and discuss procedural instructions prior to testing.

Bissonette said that when a person tests positive after being tested at the Health Department, the information is turned over to a Disease Prevention Specialist. She says that person will then have access to medical treatment and counseling. Furthermore, people using the kits may not have a doctor and never receive any help at all.

"I understand the concept," Bissonette explained. "The main problem with in-home testing is that a personal component is missing. We may never know how many people are positive."

On average, Bissonette tests 3-4 people per month.

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Allen County Health Department's HIV Education and Test Coordinator Jodi Willeke said that free, confidential and anonymous testing is available from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday. There are also open testing sites at Hardin, Auglaize, Logan, and Putnam County Health Departments.

"The test will normally find the antibodies three months after a person is infected," Willeke detailed. "They may not get sick or have any symptoms for five to 10 years after being infected."

Willeke said early detection and knowing status is very important. If a person is positive for HIV, it is better to know for many reasons.

"Get a hold of the disease early on," Willeke advises. "It will lead to a better quality of life and prevent unknowingly spreading the disease."

A reactive rapid test must be confirmed with a follow-up confirmatory test before a final diagnosis can be made. They also provide a Conventional HIV Blood Test is where a blood sample is drawn to check for the presence of antibodies to HIV. Depending on the testing site, results are generally available within two weeks.

For testing information call the AIDS Resource Center Ohio Lima Region Office at 419-222-0827, the Allen County Health Department to speak with Willeke at 419-228-4457 and the Van Wert County Health Department to speak with Bissonette at 419-238-0808, extension 101.