



At-Home Aids Test Raises Health Issues

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People around the world come together on Dec. 1 each year for World AIDS Day, a time to commemorate those lost to the deadly disease and to celebrate progress made to stop its spread. One way of preventing the spread of the disease is early detection of the HIV virus, which some say could be more easily done at home.

With nearly a quarter of the million HIV infected people in the United States unaware that they have been exposed to the HIV virus, many health care officials wonder if an at-home AIDS test would encourage more people to undergo HIV testing.

Currently, the government is considering whether to allow the first rapid, at-home AIDS test to be sold in stores.

The OraQuick rapid HIV-1 test is currently only sold to physicians and clinics.

If approved, Americans would be able to screen for the HIV virus in the privacy of their own homes.

A quick HIV test

To take the OraQuick test, an individual swabs his gums and then places the saliva coated strip in a holder. Twenty minutes later the strip shows either one line for negative or two lines for positive.

While some health officials feel that an over-the-counter AIDS test might compel more people to undergo HIV testing, others say tests must come with counseling to help people deal with the results.

Teenagers coping with at-home test results

A positive home test result could spark panic or even suicide, says Dr. Philippe Chiliade, who serves as the medical director at The Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, DC.

“If there is a young gay man, who is not open to his family and he finds out that he is HIV positive, he will have great difficulty dealing with these results by himself,” Dr. Chiliade said.

“One of the big threats of this test is that people will not have the support that they need if the test is positive.”

Understanding the test results

Another major drawback to the HIV test is that it does not detect the virus right away. It usually takes between two to twelve weeks after exposure for an infected individual to test positive.

Without understanding this critical information, a teenager who may have been exposed to the virus could take an at-home HIV test, test negative, and continue to engage in risky behavior.

Dr. Chiliade pointed out that 50% of the 40,000 new HIV cases each year are transmitted by people who have been recently infected and are unaware they are infected.

Counseling and emotional preparedness

Why is counseling such an important part of HIV testing?

People who realize they should take a test are already at risk, counselors say, and need to take “ownership” of any risky behavior.

Dr. Chiliade notes, “At the Whitman Walker Clinic we need to make sure that people who come to us for HIV testing are able to understand what the test results mean. Even if the test is negative, we still need to tell them what they can do to remain healthy.”

Benefits of an At-Home Test for Teenagers

While an at-home HIV test has the potential for devastating psychological effects on teenage users, the benefits could also be tremendous.

“The major benefit for this test would be if it would prompt a teenager into care. There might be a kid who wants to find out results in private and then armed with the results will go see a doctor,” says Susan Rosenthal, Director of Adolescent and Behavioral Health at the University of Texas.

Dr. Rosenthal also believes that an over-the-counter HIV test could lead to a much needed dialogue about sex.

“The data shows that teenagers want to talk about STDs and sex with doctors more than they bring it up,” she says.

“To the extent that this test could serve as a jumping off point for conversation among teens with their parents and doctors then it might be a good option.”

Education and Health Awareness

At the end of the day, perhaps the most important issue underlying the at-home teenage HIV testing debate is health awareness and education.

“Preventive health care is not something that young people understand very well. They think they are healthy. Even if they are HIV-negative, there are a lot of things they need to do to remain healthy. Education is very important,” Dr. Chiliade notes.

A good place for teenagers to learn about teenage sexual health issues is iwannaknow.org, a website operated by the American Social Health Organization.

--Compiled by Allison Hertz for NewsHour Extra

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