

HEAD:

Knowing Your HIV Status is Easier Than Ever With a Take-Home Test

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An easy-to-use kit available from CAN Community Health lets you test for HIV quickly, conveniently and privately at home.

By Stephen A. Smith

COPY (900 WORDS):

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1.1 million people in the United States are living with HIV, and one in seven doesn't know they have acquired the infection.

The CDC recommends that everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 years of age be screened for HIV at least once as part of their routine health care. Unfortunately, the inescapable realities that have kept people from acting on this recommendation include concerns about privacy and confidentiality, amplified by the societal stigma associated with HIV.

To get started on the path to managing or avoiding HIV, you must first know your HIV status.

The FDA has evaluated and approved a home testing kit that answers the need for a simple, confidential HIV test that can be used conveniently at home. Approved in 2012 for sale to anyone age 17 or older, the OraQuick® In-Home HIV Test is the only FDA-approved test that people can use to test for HIV at home.

The advantages of being tested at home versus in a clinic are many. With the OraQuick at-home test kit, the testing is completely confidential, and as the name implies, results are obtained quickly. The retail cost of the kit is in the neighborhood of \$45, but in Florida, Arizona and South Carolina, CAN Community Health provides them at no cost, and will even deliver one right to your home.

John Acevedo, vice president of education and program services at CAN, says that since the June 2020 rollout, CAN has distributed approximately 3,000 of the OraQuick® test kits. Response has been so strong that in a single month – July 2020, during the height of COVID-19 restrictions – CAN distributed 1,200 tests.

How does it work?

Based on a testing methodology used by healthcare professionals since 2004, the at-home test works with a simple swab of the gums to test your body's reaction to the HIV virus.

There is no blood involved. The kit contains a stick that is used to swab your upper and lower gums to collect an oral fluid sample. The stick is then placed in a tube containing a testing solution and, after an initial waiting period of 20 minutes, a single line will appear to indicate that the test is

working. A second line will tell you that the test is “reactive.” If no second line appears, it is non-reactive.

A reactive result indicates that you may have HIV, and a follow-up laboratory test will be needed to confirm the results. A video in both English and Spanish language provides clear, step-by-step instructions.

Who is getting tested?

In discussing the demographics behind the community’s response to the at-home testing program, Acevedo says, “The beauty of rolling out this program is that it gave us the opportunity to reach those who would typically not have come out to get tested.”

Of those tested, 80 percent were African American, and 70 percent of them were women of childbearing age. Acevedo says it has been telling that they’re seeing more women order the test. He attributes this group’s strong response to the convenience and confidentiality of at-home testing.

The development and wider availability of an at-home test is something Yelitza Lemoine, Director of Prevention Projects at CAN, describes as a “big boom.” It helps people who are at-risk to get around the stigma associated with HIV testing and a positive HIV status, she points out, adding that, unlike with cancer or various chronic diseases, society has been generally unsympathetic toward those who are HIV-positive. “People don’t want to be judged,” she says. “They’re nervous about their HIV status and afraid to get the result.”

Getting the word out

Borrowing from the COVID-19 testing methodology, on June 27 of last year (National HIV Testing Day), CAN launched a series of drive-through testing events throughout Florida where people could be tested without leaving their cars. Those preferring not to have a small blood sample taken could opt for the take-home test and drive away with one.

Lemoine says with the surge of the Delta variant, CAN plans to continue doing the drive-through events, realizing that people generally feel safer staying in their own cars.

Determined not to miss a single opportunity to talk about HIV risk and testing, CAN launched their Online Prevention Program in mid-2020. Through dating sites like Tinder, Adam4Adam, Grindr and OkCupid, they’ve reached out to people whose social lives were disrupted by Covid’s closing of bars, restaurants and other traditional meeting places, to provide educational and risk reduction information about HIV and other STDs.

Praising the Online Prevention Program’s effectiveness, Lemoine says, “During Covid, people felt like they were ‘trapped,’ so they were spending a lot of time online, and it was a great way to reach them, especially if they were looking for sex on the dating sites.” She adds that the burgeoning nonprofit has responded to more than 1,000 Facebook inquiries.

Along with the at-home test kits, CAN is also distributing condoms and information about PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), the drug regimen for people who are HIV-negative but at risk of infection (see our story in this issue).

CAN offers the at-home HIV test kit in Florida, Arizona and South Carolina only. Visit canhivtest.org to order your test or to find a CAN clinic in your area.

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SUGGESTED PULL QUOTE:

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Yelitza Lemoine
Director of Prevention Projects
CAN Community Health

SUGGESTED IMAGES:

ORAQUICK TEST KIT

YELITZA LEMOINE