

# Strengthening Counseling for Adolescents at VMMC Services: Individual Counseling Session Cue Card

## Counseling/Communication Objectives

As a result of this counseling session, adolescent clients will:

- Understand that both voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) and HIV testing services (HTS) are voluntary and confidential
- Have the opportunity to discuss whether they are sexually experienced or not (if they want to)
- Provide written, informed consent for VMMC and HTS
- Feel free to ask detailed questions about HIV transmission, risk reduction, VMMC, and HTS
- Understand basic post-VMMC care, importance of abstinence from masturbation/sexual intercourse, and strategies to comply with abstinence
- Understand the consequences of not abstaining
- Know some risk-reduction strategies if the client feels abstinence is not possible
- Receive a condom demonstration
- Be referred to other services as needed
- Feel welcome to return to the clinic if they decline VMMC and/or HTS or for any other reason

**Note:** When parents/caregivers are present, ask them to wait outside and allow you (the counselor) to have an individual discussion with the adolescent client. Invite parents in the room after asking permission from the adolescent and following country requirements for the legal age of majority for HIV testing.

## Content to Be Delivered During the Session

### Brief Screening for Consent/Assent and Sexual Activity

Explain:

- VMMC is voluntary and requires written consent (of parents/guardians for clients who are under the legal age of majority) AND your indication that you want to go through with the VMMC procedure.
- Everything we discuss is confidential. I will not tell anyone what we discuss today without your permission. It is my professional duty to keep our conversation confidential.
- I am a professional counselor and the information we will discuss is to help you take care of your health. Please do not feel embarrassed or shy. Feel free to ask questions. I am here to help. Also, if there is a question you do not want to answer please say so and we will move on.

Ask participant for assent and ensure the consent form is appropriately signed, if one is needed per local regulations.

Review the information given during the group counseling session about sex and masturbation:

- **Sexual intercourse** can be defined as:
  - When a man puts his penis into a woman's vagina.
  - When a man puts his penis into his partner's mouth or tongue into a woman's vagina (oral intercourse).

Ask:

- Do you have any questions about what you learned?
- Now I am going to ask you a personal question to guide our conversation. Have you ever had sex? Are you having sex now?

### Information on VMMC

For ALL adolescent males, explain:

- VMMC involves removal of the foreskin to reduce males' risk of acquiring HIV. The foreskin is the fold of skin that covers the head (the glans) of the penis.<sup>1</sup>
- VMMC only partially reduces the risk of female-to-male HIV transmission.
- After the procedure, be sure to use clean water when cleaning/caring for the wound.
- Do NOT use home remedies (herbs, ash, animal dung), which can increase the risk of infection including tetanus.
- It is important to abstain from sexual intercourse and/or masturbation for six weeks after VMMC to ensure full healing.
  - **Masturbation** is when people touch their own bodies for sexual pleasure. This may involve stroking or caressing the penis when it is erect. Masturbation may result in orgasm/ejaculation, but not necessarily.
- Clients who have not had sexual intercourse before VMMC should not start during the six weeks after VMMC because it will interfere with proper healing and put them at higher risk of acquiring HIV.

For those who are sexually experienced/active, add:

- It is important to abstain from sexual intercourse for six weeks after VMMC as it interferes with healing. In addition, resuming sex before healing from VMMC is complete can increase the risk of acquiring HIV from a partner who is HIV-positive.
  - Because VMMC provides only partial protection against HIV, when resuming sex, be sure to use condoms correctly and consistently to avoid HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)<sup>1</sup>
- In the group session, you learned strategies for abstaining. Do you have any questions? Will you be able to abstain?

For those who indicate they will NOT be able to abstain, add:

- Masturbation poses less risk than sexual intercourse, but it may increase healing time.
- There are other ways to express physical intimacy that do not involve intercourse.

Provide condoms to the client before discharge.

<sup>1</sup> Shiel, W.C. (n.d.) Medical Definition of Foreskin. MedicineNet, <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=3508>

- If you do go against the recommendation and have sexual intercourse in the six-week healing period, you must use a condom. This is important because during those six weeks you will have a wound on your penis that will make it easier to acquire HIV through sexual intercourse.

## HIV Testing

For ALL adolescent males, explain:

- HTS is optional. It is not required for VMMC, but it is highly advisable to know your HIV status.
- Would you like to proceed with an HIV test?

For those who are sexually experienced/active, explain:

- Benefits to knowing one's status include:
  - If **negative**, one can put in place strategies to stay negative.
  - If **positive**, one can start treatment immediately to stay healthy.

To ensure that you receive the appropriate consent for those under the age of testing consent, follow national guidelines. If the client declines to test, refer to "If the Client Declines to Get Tested."

For clients who test positive for HIV, explain:

- It is important to be linked to HIV treatment to stop the virus from spreading in the body. When people living with HIV have little virus in their bodies, they are less likely to transmit HIV to others and they can live healthy lives.
- It is important to use condoms with sexual partners and/or to support partners to access pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medicine to prevent HIV.<sup>2</sup>
- Clients who test positive can move forward with VMMC if the clinician agrees.
- Resuming sex before healing from VMMC is complete can result in much higher risk of infecting one's partner(s).

## HIV/Sexually Transmitted Infection Pre-Test Counseling

Follow national HTS guidelines for pre-HIV test counseling and for obtaining consent for VMMC:

- Clients who choose to test for HIV and are under the age of consent have obtained written parental/guardian consent as per government policy.
- A parent or guardian can be invited to join the session if the adolescent agrees and following country rules on the legal age of majority for HIV testing.

For ALL adolescent males, explain:

- HIV test results are confidential. This means the test results will not be shared with others, following country policies.
- It is up to the client to share his results. Clinic staff can assist if the client would like.
- The HIV test will be done by \_\_\_\_\_ (*type of test*).

Indicate type of test to be administered (ELISA, Rapid, etc.) and explain how the test will be administered.

Using age-appropriate language and building on information provided in the group counseling session cue card, check to ensure the client understands:

- Modes of HIV infection

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. HIV/AIDS: Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, <https://www.who.int/hiv/topics/prep/en/>

- Individual risk factors (tailored to each adolescent)
- HIV risk reduction strategies (VMMC, condoms, etc.)

For clients who are sexually experienced/active, add:

- Clients are encouraged to share their test results with their sexual partner(s).
- Clients' sexual partner(s) should also get tested for HIV. Clients are encouraged to talk to their partner(s) about getting tested.
- If the client chooses to test again in the future, it is recommended that he tests **together with his partner**.

### While Waiting for Test Results (in the case of a rapid test)

- Make sure the adolescent client is comfortable while waiting for his HIV test result. Talk to him to try to allay any fears related to the HIV test.
- Tell him that you (or another provider) will counsel him about his test result as soon as it is ready. This should take approximately 15 minutes.
- Reassure him that the result will be discussed confidentially and will take place in a private setting where no one else can hear or see.
- If the client is under the age of majority, tell him he may be required to bring his parent/guardian to the clinic to discuss his HIV test result (if the parent/guardian is not there already).
- Ask him if there is any topic he would like to discuss while waiting for his test result. Indicate that you can discuss family planning, masculinity/gender-based violence, and alcohol/substance use/abuse. If he expresses an interest, refer to the day two and day seven cue cards for additional information on these topics.
- Tell the client that you will refer him to appropriate services for further help and support after you discuss the test result. Tell him that there are several options for referrals to other services or providers.

Local services may include STI diagnosis and treatment; contraception/family planning; self-testing; treatment, care, and support for those who have tested HIV-positive; HIV prevention; gender-based violence prevention and reduction; entrepreneurship; legal services; HIV testing and counseling; sexual and reproductive health counseling; prevention of school drop-out; and disability rehabilitation.

- Refer the client to services (using the local referral directory) as available and appropriate, following local referral procedures.
- Provide the client with any available written material to review while he is waiting for his test result.

## If the Client Declines to Get Tested

- Tell the client you respect his decision to not get tested. Encourage him to seek HIV testing in the future. Remind him of the benefits of getting tested for HIV:
  - If the result is **negative**, he can put strategies in place to stay negative.
  - If the result is **positive**, he can start treatment immediately to stay healthy and avoid transmitting HIV to his partner(s).
- Suggest other locations that offer HIV testing (*refer to the local services directory*).
- Explain that one option to ensure confidentiality is self-testing. Self-testing entails conducting the test on one's own, following directions from a testing counselor. Ask if he is interested in self-testing. If yes, provide a referral.
- Provide the same information that is given to clients who are waiting for their test results (see above), including written information and referrals to relevant or requested services.

Consider requesting an HIV test when the client comes for his follow-up visits. Tell him the decision is his.

## Clients with an STI

- Explain that having an STI puts him at high risk of transmitting and acquiring HIV.
- Reassure him that STIs are common and all STIs are treatable. Often STIs have no symptoms, so people do not even know they have them.
- Tell him he will greatly benefit from the protection that VMMC provides.
- Explain that he is not eligible for VMMC today but should return on (*date*) for review after STI treatment and can then reschedule VMMC.
- Tell him that someone will follow up with him to schedule him for another appointment.
- Encourage him to bring his partner(s) for HIV testing and/or STI diagnosis and treatment services or refer him to STI services using the local referral directory.

If peer referrals are a part of the VMMC program, encourage the adolescent male clients to invite their friends along when they return.

See the relevant cue card for guidance on post-HIV test counseling at VMMC services.