

Strengthening Counseling for Adolescents at VMMC Services: Post-HIV Test Counseling Cue Card

Counseling/Communication Objectives

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

- Understand their HIV test results
- Feel supported emotionally as they process their test results
- If the result is negative, understand the next steps they can take to protect themselves from HIV infection
- If the result is positive, understand where they can go for care, support, and treatment¹

Note: Follow national HIV testing services (HTS) guidelines.

Content to Be Delivered During the Session

Adolescent Clients Who Test Negative for HIV

For adolescents who disclose not being sexually active, explain:

- An HIV-negative result means that you are not living with HIV.
- It is important to take steps to avoid being exposed to HIV:
 - Can you tell me one way to avoid getting HIV?
 - Do you have any questions about this?
- Remember: Abstaining or using condoms correctly and consistently are two effective ways to avoid getting HIV.
- Remember: Voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) is only partially protective against HIV. To be fully protected when you decide to become sexually active, you must use condoms during penetrative sex. Condoms also reduce the chances of contracting or transmitting other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and can help prevent unintended pregnancies.

Encourage the adolescent to invite his parent(s)/guardian or friend to be present during counseling for support, if he would like.

For adolescents who disclose being sexually active, add:

- Do you think you have been exposed to HIV recently? If so, can you tell me how you think you could have been exposed to HIV?

¹ World Health Organization (WHO) (2014) Adolescent HIV Testing, Counseling and Care: Implementation Guidance for health providers and planners. http://apps.who.int/adolescent/hiv-testing-treatment/page/Linkage_to_prevention_treatment_and_care

For adolescents who disclose being sexually active and engaging in high-risk behaviors (such as transactional sex, sex with many partners, sex with partners who are living with HIV, or other high-risk sex), add:

- Remember to use condoms correctly and consistently.
- Consider accessing pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), if it is available locally. PrEP is a pill that, if taken every day, can significantly reduce the chances of acquiring HIV, even if a person engages in risk behaviors. PrEP is not a substitute for condoms, as it does not protect against STIs.
- Note that your sexual partner(s) may also be eligible for PrEP. Please tell your partner about PrEP and where to get it.
- As we discussed in earlier sessions, it is critical to abstain from sex for six weeks after VMMC. If this is not possible, you must use condoms correctly and consistently when having sex.

Counselors should NOT pass judgement on any client, regardless of risk behaviors or any other factors.

If the client is interested, refer him to services where he can obtain PrEP.

Adolescent Clients Who Test Positive for HIV

Be sure to convey results in a compassionate, respectful way. Acknowledge the client's emotions, show empathy, and encourage the client to take positive action where possible. **If country HIV testing guidelines require it**, ensure a parent or caregiver is present to discuss the results for clients under the legal age of majority (see below).

All Adolescents Who Test Positive for HIV

Explain:

- The HIV test shows that you tested positive for HIV.
- The test results must be confirmed with another HIV test to check that they are correct. (*Explain the steps for the second test and when the results will be available.*)
- HIV cannot be cured but it can be successfully treated. Treatment stops the spread of HIV in the body so a person living with HIV does not get very sick. Also, when people living with HIV have little virus in their bodies, they are less likely to transmit HIV to others.
- People living with HIV who take their treatment as instructed can live long, healthy, normal lives. It is very important to access HIV care and treatment services as soon as possible. At the end of our conversation, I will help you to access treatment. (*Provide active linkage to care.*)
- It is very important to start treatment immediately after testing positive. The sooner you start taking your medicines, the better your health in the long-term.
- I am here to support you and answer any questions. (*Pause to let the client process the results.*)
- How do you feel? (*Acknowledge the client's feelings as a normal reaction to receiving news of a positive test result. Remind the client that HIV is a treatable condition like others, such as high sugar level in the blood (diabetes).*)

- Do you have any questions for me? (Some questions the client may ask and answers are listed in the table below.)

Question	Answer
Q: Will I die? Is there a cure for my illness?	A: As I mentioned before, there is medication you can take that can help you live a long and healthy life.
Q: Is it possible the test is wrong?	A: Yes, sometimes an HIV test result is a “false positive.” That is why we conduct a confirmatory test. I can help you arrange for this. We will need written permission from your parents/caregivers to allow you to test again (if under the age of consent).
Q: How could I be HIV-positive if I have never had sex? What could be the source of my infection?	A: You may have been infected at or around birth. Or, if you recently had a blood transfusion, you may have been infected by the blood transfusion.
Q: Should I tell my parents?	A: Yes, it is important to have a discussion about this with your parent(s)/guardian(s). They can support you to take your medication and stay healthy.
Q: How long will I have to take medication?	A: You will need to take the medication every day to stay well and to keep HIV from affecting your health. Nowadays, the medication is contained in just one pill (if this is the case).
Q: Can I infect other people?	A: You can infect others, primarily through sex. If you abstain, you will have nothing to worry about. If you are sexually active, you can protect your partner(s) by using a condom correctly every time you have sex. Also, there is the possibility of transmitting HIV by blood, through sharp objects (for example, razors, piercing tools, tools for scarification, etc.). However, you will not transmit HIV to others if you do not share these.
Q: Will I be able to continue/finish school? What about work?	A: Yes, as long as you take your medications correctly and consistently, you can remain healthy, attend school or work, lead a successful life, and fulfill your dreams.
Q: Could I hope to have a family some day?	A: You certainly can. If your partner is HIV-negative, you can help her stay that way by using condoms correctly and consistently. If she is HIV-positive, there is effective medication that can help her give birth to a healthy, HIV-negative baby.
Q: Will I have to keep my status to myself?	A: No, you do not need to be alone with your HIV status. There are support groups of other young people living with HIV where you can get important support (if this is true locally). Talking to the right people can help you find peace of mind, stop worrying, and learn to keep yourself physically healthy, including by adhering to your medication.
Q: Where can I go now? Are there services that will help me live with this disease?	A: We will provide you an active referral to treatment services to help you access treatment immediately.

- I want to make sure what we have discussed is clear, including the importance of accessing treatment. Do you have any questions about this?
- Is there anything that you have heard about HIV or living with HIV that is not clear?

- Common misconceptions include:
 - **Misconception:** An HIV-positive person can pass HIV to others by touching them, being around them, or playing sports with them.
 - **Correction:** HIV CANNOT be transmitted through sweat, tears, or feces; by touching (such as by shaking hands, contact during sports, etc.); by sharing food or drinking water; or through cooking utensils, toilet seats, bath towels, or bath water. HIV is transmitted through blood, semen, breast milk, or in the womb and through delivery. You can put others at ease by explaining these basic facts to them and referring them to printed materials and other sources of good information.
 - **Misconception:** People can tell that a person is HIV-positive just by looking at him/her.
 - **Correction:** No, you CANNOT tell that a person is HIV-positive just by looking at him/her. The only way to tell is to take an HIV test.
 - **Misconception:** People living with HIV will probably die soon.
 - **Correction:** Many people living with HIV are living long, healthy, and productive lives by taking their medication consistently and getting other emotional and physical support.
- Benefits of telling your HIV status to a person you trust include:
 - Talking to the right people can help you find peace of mind so you can stop worrying and reduce stress. Reducing stress can help you stay healthier.
 - Others can give you support and help you stay physically healthy, including by helping to ensure you take your medication correctly and consistently.
 - Support from others can help you stay emotionally healthy so you can deal with the emotional challenges you may face living with HIV.
- Although there are more benefits than risks to disclosing one's HIV status, there are also some risks worth considering when thinking about telling somebody else your status. **Risks include:**
 - **Stigma and discrimination:** Some people hold stigmatizing attitudes and may choose to discriminate or treat people living with HIV unfairly. This is often due to ignorance of how HIV is and is not transmitted. Consider whether the person you are thinking of disclosing to is open to discussing these points, or are their attitudes so fixed that it would be better to wait or not disclose to them at all?
 - **Exclusion:** Some people may refuse to associate with people living with HIV or exclude them from certain activities. This could be due to fear and ignorance about how HIV is/is not transmitted. Consider whether the person you are considering would be open to discussing how HIV is/is not transmitted.
 - **Violence or physical abuse:** Trust is the key issue when considering to whom to disclose your HIV status. Some people could become so emotional or irrational that they could physically hurt or abuse a person living with HIV. Carefully consider how much you trust a person to whom you might disclose to not violate or abuse you physically.
- Is there anybody close to you to whom you would consider telling your HIV status?
 - If so, are you comfortable telling that person your status?
 - Do you have any questions about how to do it?
 - Do you want us to help with telling this person your HIV status?

You may provide different types of HTS referrals depending on client preferences:

- **Passive referral:** Index client is encouraged to disclose to their sexual partner(s) that they have been exposed to HIV and refer them to HTS.
- **Contact referral:** Index patient is allowed a period of time to notify and refer sexual partners to HTS. If a partner does not report within a certain time, a health care provider contacts the partner.
- **Provider referral:** A health care provider contacts the clients' sexual partners concerning their exposure and directs them to HTS.
- **Dual referral:** A health care provider accompanies and provides support to the index client when they disclose their status and the potential exposure to partners.

- In addition to telling another person(s) your HIV status, consider encouraging your partner and/or family members (as appropriate) to take an HIV test.
- You may still undergo VMMC, but the procedure will not reduce HIV transmission risk to partners.
- HIV-positive men are at higher risk of transmitting HIV during the VMMC healing period. So, it is critical to abstain from sex for six weeks. If this is not possible, you must use condoms correctly and consistently when having sex.

Clients Who Are Sexually Active

Explain:

- Since you have tested positive, it is very important that your partner gets tested. (*Follow steps for index testing.*)
- Since you have tested positive, your partner may be eligible for PrEP. (*Provide information on where the partner can access PrEP.*)
- After the healing period and always, it is important to use condoms correctly and consistently to prevent onward transmission. Also note that if your viral load is very low, transmission risk is minimal. You can still have safe sexual relationships. More information on onward transmission of HIV will be provided at the center where you go for treatment. Wound care will be especially important to protecting against onward transmission of HIV.

Clients Who Are Not Sexually Active

Explain:

- Although you are not sexually active now, you should keep in mind that if/when you begin to have sex, you must always use condoms correctly and consistently to prevent onward transmission of HIV. Keeping your viral load low by taking your medicine consistently will also help you to keep HIV transmission risk to a minimum. You can always get more information about these topics at the center where you will get your medicines/treatment.
- Steps for active linkage to care. (*Ensure that these steps are clear to the client.*)
- Do you have any further questions about HIV and VMMC?

Adolescent Clients Under the Legal Age of Majority Whose Parents/Guardians Are Present

- Confirm against national guidelines if a parent or legal guardian must be present when disclosing HIV test results to an adolescent under the legal age of majority.
 - Decisions should be guided by the principle of what is in the best interest of the adolescent.
 - You may need to make certain ethical decisions on a case-by-case basis. These should be made in consultation with the adolescent AND the parent/guardian, and could include the right of the adolescent to know his HIV status versus the parent's right to decide (principle of autonomy).
 - In discussion, acknowledge the parent's/guardian's right to decide and state that you believe they will act in the best interest of the adolescent.
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- Ask if the parent/guardian would agree to disclosure of the adolescent's HIV test results to the adolescent at this time.
 - If the parent/guardian agrees, follow the points under "All Adolescent Clients Who Test Positive for HIV" to explain to the adolescent and his parents/guardians that he has tested positive for HIV.
 - Say that if a confirmatory test also returns an HIV-positive result, it may imply that his parent(s)/guardian(s) are also be HIV-positive, but this needs to be confirmed through a reputable test.
 - If this is the case, open and honest discussions about the client's and his parents'/guardians' HIV status can have many benefits, including peace of mind and better emotional health gained through mutual support and communication among family members, and better physical health through mutual support to take treatment medications correctly and consistently.
 - If the parent/guardian does not agree to disclose to the adolescent, consider the following:
 - Ask the parent/guardian to consider whether there would be benefits to the adolescent from disclosure of his HIV status (principle of beneficence).² These could include medical, psychological, or material benefits.
 - Ask the parent/guardian if they believe that disclosure to the adolescent might cause some financial, social, or psychological/emotional harm or burden to the adolescent or his family that he should be protected from (principle of protection from malfeasance). Could the adolescent cause harm to the family later by disclosing his status?
 - Discuss any of these issues with the parent/guardian to see if they can be resolved to allow disclosure to the adolescent.
 - Offer an HIV test to parent(s) and their biological children.

If parents are not present and a minor tests positive for HIV, follow national HTS guidelines on disclosure to minors.

² Klitzman, R. et. al. (2009), Ethical Issues Concerning Disclosures of HIV Diagnoses to Perinatally Infected Children and Adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Ethics* 19(1):31–42. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2770331/>

Adolescents Under the Legal Age of Majority Whose Parents/Guardians Are Not Present

- Tell the client that, according to national guidelines, the parent(s)/guardian(s) of an adolescent under age 18 must come to discuss his HIV test results together.
- Ask the adolescent to bring his parents.
- Speak to the adolescent's parents/guardians. Counsel the adolescent referring to the points guiding disclosure.
- Offer an HIV test to the client's parent(s) and their biological children.