

The Importance of HIV Testing



Key points:

- Gilead believes that expanded HIV screening is a critical component in efforts to control the global AIDS epidemic.
- The company partners with health providers, government agencies and community groups to support large-scale HIV testing programs in the United States, the European Union and developing countries.

One of the biggest obstacles to controlling HIV/AIDS is that a substantial number of people living with the virus do not know they are infected because they have not been tested for the disease. It is estimated that about one in seven HIV-positive individuals in the United States—more than 168,000 people—are unaware of their status.¹ Globally, UNAIDS estimates that half of the 35 million people living with HIV have not been tested and diagnosed.^{2,3} However, scaling up testing has never been more possible. Advances in testing technologies facilitate earlier and faster diagnosis and have greatly expanded testing in various settings, from hospital emergency rooms and clinics to community outreach settings and even in the privacy of one's home.

Gilead works alongside public health officials and community groups to increase HIV testing and link newly diagnosed people to appropriate medical care. Antiretroviral therapy can improve survival rates and life expectancy for people with HIV and can substantially reduce their risk of transmitting HIV to others by reducing the amount of virus in their blood. Additionally, studies show that a positive HIV test result is associated with as much as an 80 percent reduction in risk behavior—people who know their status are much more likely to take the steps needed to reduce transmission to their partners.⁴ An analysis of HIV transmission patterns in the United States found that people unaware of their infection are responsible for up to two-thirds of all sexually transmitted HIV infections.⁵

Implementing Widespread Screening and Linkage to Care

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended since 2006 that an HIV test be offered to all Americans ages 13-64 as a routine part of medical care. CDC's recommendation has been endorsed by nearly all leading AIDS organizations, and received the highest "A" grade in recommendations issued by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force in April 2013. However, routine screening is not yet a reality. Only one-quarter of American adults who have been tested for HIV said testing is a routine practice when they visit their doctor.⁶

Other countries face a similar need to implement widespread screening. In 2010, the Government of South Africa launched a nationwide campaign to increase HIV testing among the country's population of 50 million people. In one year, the campaign was able to reach 4.6 million individuals, a 500 percent increase over the number of HIV tests performed in 2009. Of those who were tested in 2010, 17 percent were diagnosed as HIV-positive,⁷ underscoring the value of large-scale screening programs.

Gilead's Role

Gilead works on multiple fronts to help expand HIV testing and linkage to care. These include:

- *HIV Screening in the United States:* Gilead is working in states highly impacted by HIV to align HIV testing laws with the CDC recommendations in order to reduce legal barriers to screening. Through its FOCUS program, Gilead partners with government agencies, healthcare providers, community groups and other organizations in 12 cities to create systemic change in HIV testing practices. FOCUS partners are developing models that can be replicated for routine screening and linkage to care that normalize HIV testing by integrating it into standard clinical protocols, resulting in greater scale and sustainability. In addition, FOCUS partners have implemented new HIV test technologies that detect HIV infection early, when the risk of transmission to others is highest and when linkage to care can greatly benefit an individual's long-term health. Since 2010, FOCUS partners have conducted more than one million HIV tests in emergency rooms, hospitals, community health centers and in non-traditional venues such as government agencies (e.g., Department of Motor Vehicle offices and welfare offices). More information is available at: <http://www.gilead.com/responsibility/hiv-focus-program>.

- *Partnerships in the EU:* Gilead supports a number of efforts to increase HIV testing across the European Union. For example, in the United Kingdom Gilead supports the Halve It campaign, a coalition of groups, including community organizations and the UK Department of Health, that are working to reduce by half the number of people living with undiagnosed HIV by 2015. Halve It also aims to reduce the number of people who are diagnosed with HIV late in the course of disease, when treatment may be less effective. In other EU countries, Gilead supports testing initiatives targeted to high-risk populations – for example, a program in Italy is working to increase HIV testing and linkage to care in prisons.
- *Support for Testing in Developing Countries:* The Gilead Foundation, a non-profit organization, provides funding for HIV education, counseling and testing in developing countries. The Foundation's focus is on supporting replicable programs that can achieve lasting impact in HIV-affected communities. Since 2007, Gilead has supported Grassroot Soccer, an organization that uses soccer to reach youth in Sub-Saharan Africa to deliver HIV testing and counseling information.

References

- ¹ CDC. HIV Prevention in the United States: Expanding the Impact. December 2014. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom/HIVFactSheets/Challenges/TooFewPeople.htm>. Accessed on January 6, 2015.
- ² UNAIDS. World AIDS Day Report 2012.
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- ⁴ Janssen, RS and Valdiserri, RO. HIV prevention in the United States: Increasing emphasis on working with those living with HIV. JAIDS. 2004;37(2):S119-S125.
- ⁵ Hall, HI et al. HIV transmission rates from persons living with HIV who are aware and unaware of their infection. AIDS. 2012;26(7):893-6.
- ⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation. HIV/AIDS at 30: A Public Opinion Perspective. June 2011.
- ⁷ SAPA. 4.6 Million Take HIV Test in SA. December 1, 2010.