Genetic HIV Tests Effective but Rarely Used

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A test that looks for genetic traces of HIV detects the virus sooner after initial infection than standard antibody tests, but health professional rarely use it, according to *The New York Times*.

The test, which hunts down pieces of HIV's ribonucleic acid (RNA), can detect an HIV infection that has occurred in the past month during its acute or primary stage. During that time, the virus is replicating rapidly but the body has not yet developed an immune response. Experts say that since the RNA test identifies HIV earlier, before HIV antibodies are present, it can be an effective tool in preventing new infections.

"People with acute infection have more virus in the blood, and if they're unaware they're infected, they're more likely to engage in risky behavior," said Kenneth Mayer, MD, professor of medicine at Brown University and a leading AIDS researcher.

Regular RNA tests are rarely performed because they are expensive, involve drawing blood and complicated laboratory work and don't provide immediate results. To reduce the costs, the some health departments pool blood samples together for RNA testing; if a batch tests positive, then each individual sample is tested.

However, a more affordable alternative to the RNA test—the antibody-antigen test—may come soon, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This test appears to be able to recognize 85 percent of the acute HIV infections picked up by the RNA test and could be commercially accessible by next year, agency officials told the Times.

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