Home Alone

Over-the-counter HIV tests: helpful or harmful?

November 13, 2012 By Trent Straube

The first at-home rapid HIV test kit became available over the counter in October. Is this a treat, or a trick? Depends on whom you ask. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the OraQuick test in hopes of reaching people who wouldn't get tested in other situations. It costs about $40 and gives results in 20 to 40 minutes after you swab the inside of your mouth (no blood is involved). OraSure, makers of the test, has set up a bilingual, 24/7 support center to direct referrals and answer questions. The home tests don't always detect HIV during the first three months of infection—the so-called "window period"—and there will be false positives (one out of every 5,000 tests of people who are actually negative) and false negatives (about one out of every 12 tests of people who are in fact positive). This is called 99.98 percent specificity and 92 percent sensitivity, respectively.

What happens if people use the tests to screen their hookups? To find out, Columbia University researcher Alex Carballo-Dieguez, PhD, gave home HIV tests to 32 "high, high risk" men who had unprotected anal sex with multiple men. Of their nearly 140 sexual partners in New York City, 72 percent agreed to the tests and 10 tested positive; there were seven verbally aggressive reactions but no physical violence. The men liked having the testing option and said it helped them curb their risk-taking. (For further details, click here.)

POZ online readers expressed their own thoughts on the subject. An edited sampling:

This absolutely gives a false sense of security and is the wrong direction.
—Chris, Tampa

Do we care about people once they've tested positive, or is any cost OK so the bareback party crowd can decrease their risk?
—Horrified

People have a right to know the positive status of their sexual partners.
—Jeton, Harlem, NY

This test will create more prejudice toward us. People should know that condoms work for them, not against them.

—Mike

Testing and treatment of HIV should be left up to the professionals.
—Keith, Portland

This provides people the choice to get tested in the most comfortable surroundings they can make.
—SoulAsylum, Minneapolis

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/home-HIV-test-23127-2398