USB Stick Can Test HIV Viral Load

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Researchers are in the early stages of developing a USB stick that could measure an HIV-positive person's viral load. An individual would place a drop of blood onto a mobile chip and insert the miniature device into a computer or handheld electronic device to get results within half an hour with a 95 percent level of accuracy.

Traditional viral load tests typically require a three-day turnaround to get the results back from an off-site laboratory. Around the world, such tests are often unavailable to people with HIV, so the USB-based test could fill this gap, particularly in hard-hit sub-Saharan Africa.

"In such situations it could probably be used by health care workers with relatively little training," says Graham Cooke, MD, the senior author of the research on the USB device and a professor in the infectious diseases department at Imperial College London.

Conducting routine viral load tests is a vital part of providing effective HIV treatment because the results indicate how well antiretroviral drugs are suppressing the virus.

According to Cooke, individuals could one day use the USB test to determine their viral load much in the same way that people with diabetes test their blood sugar at home with simple devices.

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