

GAY/LESBIAN COMMUNITY STATEMENT ON
HTLV-III/LAV ANTIBODY TEST
JANUARY 11, 1985

With the expected licensing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration of the test for antibodies to HTLV-III/LAV, the virus considered to be associated with AIDS, it is important to state what we believe this test does and does not do, what its potential misuses are, and what risks members of the gay community face if they take this test.

It is our recommendation that, except in rare circumstances, this test should be used ONLY in the context of screening blood donations and as part of research programs that guarantee strict confidentiality. Individuals should be aware that this test will NOT provide answers to such questions as: am I healthy? do I have AIDS? am I a carrier of AIDS? have I been exposed to AIDS? can I give AIDS to someone else?

The HTLV-III antibody test does NOT diagnose AIDS. It simply measures the development of antibodies to the HTLV-III/LAV virus. It could mean there has been no prior exposure or infection by the virus, that the individual is still in an incubation period before development of the antibody, that there may have been a prior infection and the antibody is no longer detectable, that the test was performed incorrectly, or that the test itself was inaccurate.

Irrespective of test results, we underscore the importance of all members of high-risk groups continuing to follow prevention guidelines that have been put forward by AIDS service organizations, including the adoption of safe sex practices. The declining rates of sexually transmitted diseases among gay men in many cities show the success of these efforts. Whether one has tested positive or negative, whether one has been exposed to the HTLV-III virus or not, safe sex practices may help to prevent either new or further exposure to the virus or the transmission of the virus to another party.

While the blood test will be used to screen donations at blood banks, the test will not eliminate all donations that have been exposed to the HTLV-III virus and are therefore potentially infectious. There is evidence that individuals who test negative can, in some cases, be carrying the HTLV-III virus. Therefore, this test is simply an added measure to screen donors and is NOT a substitute for the donor deferral guidelines that recommend that those persons falling into at-risk groups should refrain from donating blood at this time. This includes all males who have had sex with more than one male since 1979, and males whose male partner has had sex with more than one male since 1979.

Though we advise against individuals being tested, those who desire a test should NOT use the blood banking system as a means for getting the HTLV-III antibody test. Since the test is not 100 percent accurate and does not always detect infectivity, some blood that should not be transfused might pass through the system if the donor deferral guidelines are not followed in addition to the blood test.

Individuals should be aware of the fact that their test results may be requested and obtained by third parties. Before requesting a blood test under any circumstances, we urge all individuals, particularly those in the gay community, to consider the following risks:

- If a positive antibody test becomes part of your medical record, it could become justification for denial of life or health insurance in the future. (We are already aware of cases where individuals considered at risk to AIDS have been denied insurance.)

- A positive antibody test could also become a reason for denying employment. While lacking in medical justification, we are deeply concerned that this test will become a mechanism for screening out individuals who are at-risk to AIDS from jobs in such fields as health care, food handling, or child care. There is no evidence that AIDS is transmitted except through exchange of vital bodily fluids. This has not stopped some from already discriminating against those somehow associated with AIDS or the groups considered to be at risk to AIDS. Given the high level of exposure to the virus--and initial studies that show a high positive test rate--among gay men, we are also concerned that potential employers may use the test as an indicator for homosexuality.

- The psychological pressures of knowing that one has tested positive to antibodies is one of deep concern to our community. While a positive test result does not necessarily mean one is going to develop AIDS, there has been sufficient inaccurate publicity suggesting that this is indeed a test for AIDS. Until that link is broken, the mental health impact of receiving a positive test result could be devastating. The misconceptions and general level of hysteria among the general public about AIDS increases the likelihood of a panicked response to a positive test result.

We continue to encourage members of our community to participate in research studies that might help find the answers to the AIDS riddle, including studies using this HTLV-III antibody test in the hope that a clearer meaning to positive and negative results might be developed. However, we continue to urge--particularly in light of the risks outlined above--that confidentiality for all research subject participants, including the commitment that identifiers will not be shared with third parties.

This document was prepared and distributed by the following organizations:

National Gay Task Force AID Atlanta
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American Association of Physicians for Human Rights
Baltimore Health Education Resources Organization
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Gay Men's Health Crisis
Gay Rights National Lobby
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