

## My close call with HIV

### About me

I'm a gay male and I just turned 21. I live in Milwaukee.

### An unexpected phone call

A person I was dating didn't tell me he was HIV positive. While we were together we had unprotected sex twice. A little while later I got one of the most awful calls you can ever get. I picked up the phone and the person on the other end said, "Hi, I'm calling from the Department of Health. Someone you've been in sexual contact with is positive for HIV."

You know how it sometimes feels like your having a serious hot flash? That's what I felt when I got that call. I was so petrified! Even though I knew I needed to go get tested, I didn't do it for two weeks. Those two weeks were awful. What if I was infected? What if I had HIV? I would dream about it. I would start sweating just thinking about it. My skin would crawl whenever I heard someone say "HIV". I even cried.

Eventually I pulled myself together and got myself to a clinic.

### Going to the clinic for the test

I went to UMOS in Milwaukee. UMOS provides free individualized, anonymous, and confidential HIV pretest counseling, testing, and post-test counseling in English and Spanish in Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha Counties. An anonymous test means that no one will know that you had an HIV test or be able to put your name to your results.

After filling out the usual paperwork a woman came out and brought me back for my HIV test. Much to my relief she was cool and funny and not judgmental at all. She asked me why I came in and I told her about my ex-boyfriend and the call I got from the Department of Health.

I couldn't help telling her how shocking it was to get that call and how nervous I'd been since. She was very reassuring. She told me she understood and that it is fine and that people make mistakes. If I did test positive it was definitely NOT the end of the world. She told me there was medicine I could take. This was good news and eased my mind a bit, although I've learned that HIV medications can have some

not-so-great side effects and they work better for some people better than others. So it's not as easy as taking a pill and forgetting about it. She also told me that my status would be protected - meaning they couldn't tell anyone that I had come in for testing.

### **The test itself**

There are different ways to get tested for HIV, including taking blood. The quickest way is the oral test - you get the results back in 20 minutes and there is no blood.

She put a test strip in my mouth and swabbed my cheek and gum and then put it in a container off to the side of her desk so I couldn't see it. Those 20 minutes seemed like they took forever! I felt like I was still in shock and having an out-of-body experience. I was scared. If it came back positive, what would people think of me?

Fortunately the counselor was there to keep me talking and at ease. She had me laughing and she was cracking jokes. In the middle of it she looked over at the container with the swab and said, "Hey, you're negative!" What a relief!

The counselor talked with me a little bit longer. One of the things she encouraged me to do is to get tested together with any future significant others. She told me that's a really important part of any relationship that's sexual. Her advice was smart and it made me feel good.

### **Advice for other guys**

If you're a guy who has sex with other guys and you're nervous about getting tested for HIV, I want you to know I understand. Really, I do. Just look at the beginning of this story again – I was petrified! If you are nervous, just take a deep breath and relax. Try to stay calm. Be the better person and don't run from it - it only makes it worse. In order to stop HIV from spreading we have to take a stand by keeping ourselves and our partners safe.

If you do test positive for HIV, remember that there is medicine, and that it's not a death sentence. While there are definitely possible complications and side-effects that come with taking HIV medication it's important to remember that testing positive is not the end of the world.

Since my scare and my test I ALWAYS protect myself. Some friends who know I always use protection give me a hard time. "But what if it's just the two of you? If you're only having sex with one guy would you still use condoms?" My response is that safe sex is the best sex. Better safe than sorry!

## Discussion Questions

1. What surprised you about this story? What new information did you gain?
2. Greg mentioned anonymous testing. What's the difference between anonymous and confidential testing. Why might anonymous testing be important?
3. How well do you think Greg's experience with getting tested went? What could someone do if they didn't have someone as friendly and upbeat as the woman who tested him?
4. What do you think it would be like to get the call from the Department of Health that Greg received? Who might you turn to for support?
5. Why do you think Greg saw testing positive for HIV as a possible "death sentence"?
6. What information in this article do you feel would be helpful to share with someone who is thinking about getting tested? What are some ways to share this information with friends?