HIV testing at Columbia: Can unaffiliated partners of students be tested?  

Dear Alice,

I'm a Columbia student, but my boyfriend is not. We want to be tested for HIV. Is that available and free to him, as well, or just to me?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you and your boyfriend for wanting to get tested for HIV! Since you're a Columbia student, you can get tested for HIV at no additional cost through the Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP), a part of Health Services that serves the entire Columbia community. GHAP also tests partners of Columbia students, faculty, officers, and staff, so you and your boyfriend can go together. However, your counseling sessions are separate.

GHAP's HIV testing and counseling sessions take place in Primary Care Medical Services. The walk-in HIV antibody testing schedule varies each semester. To find out the current hours and location, as well as to get additional info that guides you through the testing and counseling process, check the GHAP website. The first hour is the busiest; try coming later if you can. Due to New York State regulations, the HIV testing procedure involves a pre-test session, where the person being tested talks with a peer advocate or professional staff person who is trained in HIV transmission and prevention issues as well as other related topics. The entire visit (from walking in to getting your blood drawn) will last about one hour max; the actually length varies from person to person. Results are given back in person the next day.

New York State HIV testing regulations changed as of June 1, 2000, now causing GHAP to offer confidential instead of anonymous testing. What's the difference? Anonymous HIV testing means you won't be asked questions that could trace your testing information back to you, such as your full name, social security number, address, and phone number. With confidential HIV testing, some of this information is collected. GHAP is required by law to maintain confidentiality and your information will NOT be recorded by the Department of Health if your result is negative. If your HIV-antibody test comes back positive, meaning that you are infected with HIV, your identifying information will be used for surveillance purposes (statistical data) and for the partner notification program ONLY. The Department of Health can contact you to assist you in notifying sexual and needle-sharing partners of their possible exposure to HIV. You are not required to give information about your partners. The Department of Health and GHAP cannot disclose your HIV status without your consent to
anyone for any other reason, including parents, insurance companies, other government or private agencies, landlords, welfare programs, etc. If you have any questions or concerns about confidentiality, you can talk about them during your counseling session.

If you and/or your boyfriend prefer anonymous HIV testing, you can try one of the New York City or State Department of Health (NYC/S DOH) testing sites [4].

HIV resources are also available online and are worth reading before getting an HIV test:

- Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) [5]? The most comprehensive NYC AIDS site, providing information, references, an explanation of the new testing laws, clinical updates, and other resources.
- HIV InSite [6]? Sponsored by the University of California-San Francisco School of Medicine, this site contains a wealth of information on HIV and the prevention of transmission.
- National HIV Testing Resources [7]? Sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this site can provide a testing location for anyone in the United States.

Knowing your status is an important way to protect your health. Good luck!

Alice!
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