

HIV Counseling and Testing Manual for Youth Provides Valuable Tool

HIV testing offers opportunities to discuss sexuality, contraception, and future choices.

HIV testing is increasing available in many countries, offering an opportunity for providers to discuss not only issues related to HIV but also sexual behavior in general, including prevention of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy. Youth constitute a large proportion of clients receiving HIV tests. Research has shown that as many as one of every three people seeking HIV testing in some sites is under age 24.

Many providers are not accustomed to working with youth or meeting their particular needs. Counselors and other service providers need an easy-to-use tool to improve their skills and confidence in talking to youth about HIV testing. *HIV Counseling and Testing for Youth: A Manual for Providers* is such a resource (available at: <http://www.fhi.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/rhtrainmat/vctmanual.htm>). YouthNet developed the manual in conjunction with counselors at HIV testing centers in Nairobi, Kenya.

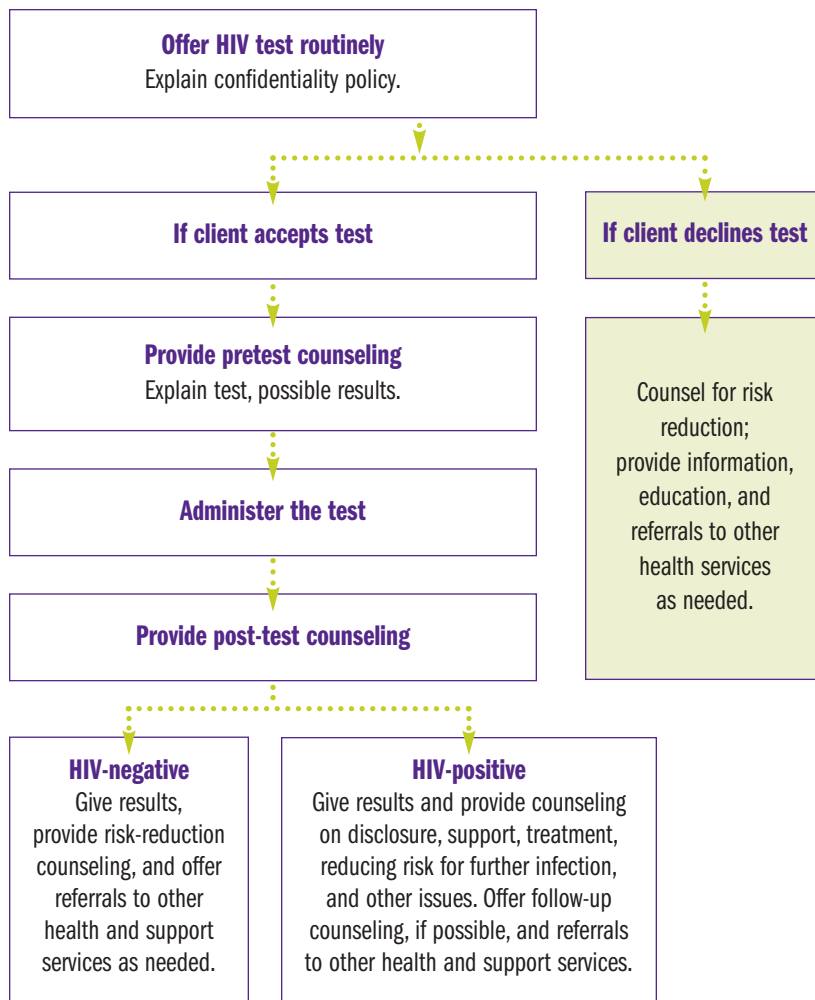
The manual provides:

- guidance on how to counsel youth
- approaches to HIV counseling and testing
- information on other STIs
- a convenient chart on contraceptive options
- information for counseling about life skills
- a convenient guide to record local referral networks

Unlike adults, when youth are dealing with an HIV test – either by voluntarily going to a testing site or being offered a test in a setting such as an antenatal clinic – they may be more interested in counseling and information than in being tested. In addition, youth may not be candid about their sexual experiences out of fear of stigma and labels. For these and other

reasons, counseling youth often takes more time than working with adults. Messages and information may need to vary depending on a young person’s age, knowledge, sexual experience, family situation, and other factors.

HIV Counseling and Testing in Clinical Settings



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Approaches to Counseling and Testing

The manual features a clear four-step process for offering HIV counseling and testing that can be applied in a clinical setting or at a voluntary counseling and testing site. The process for this testing in a clinical setting is shown in the figure on the front. A set of essential elements should be present in the process, regardless of setting, available resources, and other conditions. For example, the test should be administered only after the client has given informed consent to be tested, and confidentiality must be assured.

Ways to provide the necessary counseling and protections are emphasized in each of the four steps:

1. Offering the HIV test with varying degrees of counseling
2. Providing pretest counseling, which can vary, depending on the setting
3. Administering the HIV test, if the client decides to have one
4. Providing post-test counseling and support

There is often more time for counseling in a voluntary testing center than in a busy clinical setting, where the HIV test is part of a larger group of tests. Those in clinical settings may be most in need of this resource.

“We doctors are not trained on counseling despite the fact that we are the ones who go around and order the HIV tests,” wrote a Tanzanian clinician from Dar es Salaam after receiving the manual. “What we actually do is quite often advising the patient or the parent to accept screening and not counseling per se. It must be a very traumatic experience to the patients. Quite often they have to accept the test not because they want to, but because I am the one treating them, and if they refuse, they may not get adequate treatment on the pretence that they refused the test. So you can see that your book is going to help me through all this.”

The manual also emphasizes counseling after the test, regardless of the outcome. “Help youth to develop a plan to change any risky behaviors and maintain their HIV-negative status,”

the manual advises. “Encourage them to consider the benefit of being faithful to one partner and explain the risks of having multiple, concurrent partners.” The section on testing and counseling includes sample tips and role plays for how to practice abstinence, remain faithful, and if sexually active, how to negotiate condom use. The abstinence role play, for example, gives suggestions for how people might respond if someone is trying to persuade them to have sex.

A Holistic Approach for Youth

Discussing an HIV test with a young person provides a natural opportunity to discuss sexuality and the potential risks of having sex. The manual includes easy-to-read charts on key issues regarding other STIs, divided by bacterial and viral infections with bulleted information on each. The chapter itemizes the serious consequences that STIs can have, with emphasis on consequences for young women.

The section of the manual on contraceptive methods for adolescents describes key counseling issues for youth about each method, along with information on pregnancy rates and whether the method is appropriate and safe for adolescents. Other points of emphasis in the pregnancy prevention section are delaying childbearing, abstinence, dual protection for preventing both unintended pregnancy and STIs, how to handle missed oral contraceptive pills, and negotiating condom use.

During its development, the Kenyan counselors felt that including a section on life skills was critical for the manual. Ideally, even in a busy setting, the counseling process should include at least some mention of such skills as developing critical thinking, being assertive, and developing good support networks. Bulleted points are included for easy reference by counselors. It also includes a section on creating referral networks.

— *William Finger*

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