

An addition to sexual foreplay: Take this HIV test?

By [Laura Shin](#) | October 16, 2012, 3:00 AM PDT



SmartPlanet is all about innovation that impacts your world, and here's an impact you probably didn't think of.

The OraQuick test that allows people to find out whether they have HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, in the privacy of their own homes is now on sale for \$40. And some experts believe that people may use it in an even more novel way: to screen potential sexual partners.

[The New York Times reports](#) that such a use could help slow the rate of infection, which has remained at about 50,000 new infections a year. Why? “Studies have found that a significant minority of people who are H.I.V.-positive either lie about their status or keep it secret, infecting unsuspecting partners.” (Yikes. More on that below.)

In clinical trials run by OraSure Technologies, the manufacturer, 70% of the 4,000 male and female participants said they would use OraSure to test a potential partner, and some suggested that the company put two tests in one kit so couples could do the test together.

Potential benefits

Columbia University psychology professor Alex Carballo-Diéguez conducted a small [study](#) of 27 gay men who frequently had sex with near strangers without condoms to see whether the test could help prevent some infections. Published online in August by the journal *AIDS and Behavior*, the study confirmed that yes, it likely would.

Each man was given 16 tests and followed for three months. During that time, 101 partners were tested and 10 tested positive — for six of them, the OraQuick test was how they found out they had HIV. Twenty-three partners refused to take the test and two, when asked to take the test, confessed to having the virus.

The Times also says, “Seven men got angry, and one stomped on the kit. One man walked out saying he wanted to be alone and broke off contact.”

But for the most part, the men in the study said that asking did not ruin the intimacy, and during the 20-minute waiting period, the partners played video games or engaged in foreplay. “One 47-year-old man found the wait helpful, telling the researchers, ‘It gives you that extra 20 minutes to decide, “O.K., if this comes back negative, am I really ready to bareback?’” — slang for having sex without a condom,” The Times says.

Potential pitfalls

But the biggest downside of using the test in this way is the fact that the test is not perfect. The Times reports:

It is nearly 100 percent accurate when it indicates that someone is not infected and, in fact, is not.

But it is only about 93 percent accurate when it says that someone is not infected and the person actually does have the virus, though the body is not yet producing the antibodies that the test detects.

Additionally, a negative test does not mean that the partner is free of other sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea. To protect against those, the partners should still use a condom.

The real issue

As you can see, a negative result on the OraQuick test could give false assurance to a partner. But, one big upside is that it could get infected people to be more honest about their status, because two studies have shown that a significant minority of infected people keep mum.

In a large [2007 survey](#) led by Dr. Robert Klitzman, also of Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute, one in five infected gay men admitted having unprotected sex with at least one partner without revealing their status. Their reasoning? They were not infectious or it was the partner's responsibility to ask.

The Times also reports:

An equally large [2003 study](#) led by Dr. Daniel H. Ciccarone of the University of California, San Francisco, found that about 9 percent of H.I.V.-positive heterosexual men and women and about 14 percent of infected gay or bisexual men had recently had unprotected sex with someone they either knew was uninfected or were unsure about, without revealing their own infection.

Think those stats aren't depressing enough?

The article concludes: "The authors estimated that in the six months their study covered, 17,000 infected gay men across the country and almost 5,000 infected heterosexual men and women had sex without telling the truth."