Are there reasons not to have a test?
In most cases it is much better to know if you have a BBV infection so you can be monitored and have any necessary treatment.

If you are depressed or really feel you could not cope with a positive result it may be better to get help with this before you take the test – but most people cope with the diagnosis even if they thought they could not.

If you have a positive test you may find it harder to get life assurance, for example with a mortgage, but it is not impossible. A negative test should not affect your ability to get insurance.

Going for BBV tests
You can have confidential testing for BBV with your GP, at the Genito-Urinary Medicine clinic or at any BBV testing Clinic. It can be stressful to go alone – think about taking a friend you trust for support, especially when you are going to get the result.

Think about who you would tell if you got a positive result – and who you would not tell. If you tell people you are going for a test they will probably ask about the result.

All services are confidential and will not disclose your result without your consent. In most cases you will be given the result in person – positive or negative. It is important to return to your GP or hospital to discuss your results.

Contact details

Appointments
Genito-Urinary Medicine
Edinburgh:
0131 536 2103 (men)
0131 536 2104 (women)
West Lothian:
01506 464668

HIV Counselling Clinic
Western General Hospital
Edinburgh
0131 537 2864

Advice and Information
C Plus (Hepatitis C Care and Support)
22 Laurie Street, Edinburgh EH6 7AB
0131 478 7929

Waverley Care Community Projects
1-3 Mansfield Place, Edinburgh EH3 6NB
Tel: 0131 558 1425

NHS 24 (Health advice and information service)
Tel: 08454 24 24 24 or visit the website at www.nhs24.com

Harm Reduction Team
Offers testing at various sites across Lothian. For details and appointments call the Blood Borne Virus Prevention Nurse on 0131 537 8300
What are Blood Borne Viruses (BBV)?

There are three main blood borne viruses – HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. They are passed between people through:

- sharing of any injecting equipment including spoons, filters and water
- unprotected sex – heterosexual or homosexual
- unsterile medical treatment or unsterile body piercing/tattoos
- blood to blood contact from an infected individual e.g. in a fight.

They can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby. Treatment can greatly reduce the risk of HIV and Hepatitis B. The risk of Hepatitis C is low.

HIV and Hepatitis B are more common in men who have sex with men and in people who have lived abroad, especially in Southern Africa, the Far East and Eastern Europe. Hepatitis C is common in drug users who have ever injected. Hepatitis C is less likely to be transmitted through sex.

How do the viruses affect people?

After HIV infection someone can have a flu-like illness and then remain well for many years. The virus gradually destroys the body’s defences – the immune system – making it difficult to fight off infections. Severe damage to immunity is called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

Hepatitis B infection can cause a mild or severe inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) with jaundice. Sometimes this can be fatal. About 20% of people infected will have a long term infection. This gradually damages the liver causing scarring (cirrhosis) and sometimes liver cancer.

Hepatitis C infection is usually silent for many years. It also causes cirrhosis of the liver and the risk of cancer. People with the infections often feel very tired and have poor concentration. They may have a flu-like illness.

If cirrhosis of the liver develops, people can be very ill and die.

What are the BBV tests?

Each virus has its own blood tests that tell us different things about the infections.

HIV
The first test is an antibody test detecting the body’s immune reaction to the virus. If this test for HIV is positive it means that you are infected with the virus. Other tests called the CD4 count and the viral load will be then taken to see if the immune system has been damaged yet and how much virus is in the blood.

Hepatitis C
The first test is also an antibody test. If this is positive another test (PCR or viral load) is carried out to see if the virus is still present in the body. Up to 80% of infected people can become long term carriers of this virus with risk of liver damage.

Hepatitis B
A blood test works out if there is an ongoing infection. This can also show if the person has fought off the infection and is now protected against future Hepatitis B infection.

Why have a test?

All three viruses can cause serious illness and death after a long infection. In the early stages many people feel well and do not realise that they are infected. There is now treatment for Hepatitis B and C that can often cure the infection, and treatment for HIV that can control it. The treatments can be difficult to take and can have side-effects. For HIV, treatment will be lifelong. Treatments are improving all the time.

Knowing about an infection allows you to protect your health – for example by stopping drinking alcohol if you have Hepatitis B or C. You can also protect others from getting the infection from you, by avoiding unsafe sex and not sharing injecting equipment. Women can also make choices about pregnancy and protecting their unborn child from HIV and Hepatitis B.

Some of these viruses take 3-6 months to show up in the blood – if you have been at risk during this time you may be advised to get a repeat test even if your first result is negative. If you put yourself at risk again you should consider having a further test.