

HIV Tracing: Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS HIV TRACING (ALSO KNOWN AS ENHANCED PARTNER SERVICES FOR CLUSTER DETECTION AND RESPONSE)?

HIV tracing is the process of identifying groups of people whose HIV appears to be related. When we see many recent HIV diagnoses in such a group, people in this group are followed up with by Public Health- Seattle & King County (PHSKC) to help prevent further spread. Since HIV evolves and changes rapidly, similarities in HIV strains can help identify where HIV is spreading so that Public Health can work to provide additional support and resources to people involved in HIV clusters.

WHAT IS AN HIV CLUSTER?

HIV clusters are groups of people shown to have similar HIV strains, or who may have some other connection with each other. The other connections may be through sexual partnerships, shared injection equipment, or other shared characteristics (for example, people who live in the same geographic area and who were diagnosed with HIV around the same time).



**HIV tracing
gets people the care
& resources they need**

HOW ARE HIV CLUSTERS IDENTIFIED?

Similarities in HIV strains (found using HIV genotype lab results) are the main method of identifying clusters. Results of HIV genotype tests show a small part of the genetic makeup of a person's HIV strain. This data comes from a blood sample collected after a person is diagnosed with HIV to examine the genetic structure of the virus (*not* of the person). Using this, clinicians can identify any mutations that may make certain treatment options less effective for that person. Similarities in the genetic makeup of a person's HIV are then identified by Public Health and used to determine who may be involved in an HIV cluster.

WHY IS PHSKC CONDUCTING HIV TRACING? HOW IS THIS INFORMATION BEING USED?

HIV tracing helps to show where HIV transmission is occurring rapidly so that PHSKC staff can provide enhanced outreach and support to prevent new infections among those at greatest risk of HIV. HIV tracing is also done to help identify populations with greater need, so that optimal clinical outcomes can be achieved among all people living with HIV (PLWH). The goal of HIV tracing is to provide outreach and support to individuals who are newly diagnosed with HIV or who may have fallen out of care. When PHSKC staff identify potential HIV clusters that appear to be growing, staff will reach out to selected cluster members to initiate a conversation about their care and how they are doing and

may help them to connect to care or other needed services.

HOW DOES CONNECTING INDIVIDUALS TO HIV CARE HELP TO LOWER HIV TRANSMISSION?

Taking daily antiretroviral medication helps to lower a person's HIV viral load to a level that is no longer detectable, and no longer transmissible to others. This is also known as **U = U, or undetectable = untransmittable**. This means that the virus can no longer be transmitted to others through sexual contact. With an undetectable viral load, it is also likely that HIV transmission is greatly reduced among people sharing injection drug equipment, though fewer studies have addressed this. Additionally, people who have unmet needs for other services often struggle with HIV care. PHSKC is using HIV cluster data to try to connect people with other services that they may need so that they are better able to engage with HIV care.

WHAT CAN WE NOT LEARN FROM IDENTIFYING HIV CLUSTERS?

While two people may be shown to have similar HIV strains, this does not mean that one of them passed the HIV infection to the other. Since HIV clusters mostly include people who have seen a provider for HIV and had genotype testing, additional persons who have not yet been diagnosed with HIV or who may not be connected to care may also be involved in transmission events, making it **impossible to tell who acquired HIV from whom**. This means that the direction of HIV transmission can never be determined using cluster data, and it is also not possible to know

that two people acquired HIV from the same person.

HOW AND WHY ARE HIV GENOTYPE DATA COLLECTED?

PHSKC collects laboratory data for HIV and many other infections, including foodborne illnesses, sexually transmitted infections, COVID-19, and many other reportable conditions. Under WAC 246-101 (the Washington law about notifiable conditions), HIV is considered reportable, and it is mandatory that all HIV lab data be reported to the State of Washington, including HIV genotype data. Public Health collects information on these test results for many reasons. For example, Public Health has monitored COVID variants of concern, and similarly, Public Health also monitors strains of HIV that are of special concern. This includes those strains resistant to medications used to treat HIV, and those resistant to drugs used as HIV Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP).

WHO HAS ACCESS TO THE HIV CLUSTER INFORMATION?

Only a very small group of people who work at the health department have access to HIV data, including genotype data. These workers undergo extensive confidentiality and data



security training prior to accessing this data, and the data are stored securely in a protected database. HIV genotype data are also shared with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), although no personal identifying information is included when the data are shared with CDC. These data are only used for public health purposes within public health agencies.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT IF I AM FOUND TO BE PART OF AN HIV CLUSTER?

If you are found to be a potential member of an HIV cluster, you may be contacted by a member of the PHSKC HIV outreach team. This person will initiate an open conversation to see how you are doing and will offer to discuss topics related to establishing HIV care or help to connect you with any other medical or social services you may be seeking (or may benefit from). They will also offer to assist with anonymous outreach to any sexual or injection partners who may benefit from HIV testing through PHSKC's Partner Services.

IF I AM FOUND TO BE PART OF AN HIV CLUSTER, WILL MY SEX PARTNERS BE NOTIFIED?

When you are contacted as part of an HIV cluster, the PHSKC staff member you speak with will offer to contact any sex partners that you choose to identify to inform them that they

may benefit from HIV testing (if they are not yet diagnosed). However, your name or any identifying information will never be shared with sexual partners that are contacted. You can also contact your partners yourself, and our outreach worker can help you with this if you don't know what to say!

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING HIV TRACING?

While the use of HIV tracing is still a somewhat new practice, in the first half of 2021, 55% of those that spoke with a PHSKC HIV outreach person as part of HIV tracing were given resource referrals, including referrals to medical care, support groups, mental health counseling, COVID-19 vaccination, housing screening assessment services, and rental assistance services. HIV tracing was also used in 2018 to confirm a growing HIV cluster occurring in North Seattle after a PHSKC field worker first noticed an increase in cases. Many cluster members were unhoused and injecting drugs. Identification of this cluster allowed public health staff to intervene and offer supportive services to this group. Staff conducted a rapid needs assessment, and provided 2,485 additional HIV screening tests to people in the area at elevated risk for HIV, and also provided 87,488 clean syringes in the area of the outbreak.

GOT ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS?

Email HIVEpi@kingcounty.gov

