

US trying out free rapid AIDS test at drugstores

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Walgreen's pharmacy manager Sarah Freedman stands in her store in Washington, Tuesday, June 26, 2012. Would you go to a pharmacy to get tested for the AIDS virus? Health officials want to know. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday announced a \$1.2 million pilot project to offer free rapid HIV tests at pharmacies and clinics in 24 cities and rural communities. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

(AP) — U.S. health officials have set up a \$1.2 million pilot program to that will offer free rapid HIV tests at pharmacies and in-store clinics in 24 cities and rural communities in hopes that testing for the AIDS virus will become another routine service along with blood pressure checks and flu shots.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the program Tuesday

"By bringing HIV testing into pharmacies, we believe we can reach more people by making testing more accessible and reduce the stigma associated with HIV," CDC's Dr. Kevin Fenton said in a statement. He oversees the agency's HIV prevention programs.

The tests are already available at seven places, and the CDC will soon pick 17 more locations.

The HIV test is a swab inside the mouth and takes about 20 minutes for a preliminary result. If the test is positive, customers will be referred to a local health department or other health-care providers for a blood test to confirm the results, counseling and treatment.

When the project ends next summer, CDC officials will analyze what worked well and what didn't, said Paul Weidle, the epidemiologist who is heading up the project.

An estimated 1.1 million Americans are infected with HIV, but as many as 20 percent of them don't know they carry the virus, according to the CDC. It can take a decade or more for an infection to cause symptoms and illness.

Since 2006, the CDC has recommended that all Americans ages 13 to 64 get tested at least once, not just those considered at highest risk: gay men and intravenous drug users.

On special occasions, health organizations have sent workers to some drugstores to offer HIV testing. This week, Walgreens — the nation's largest chain of pharmacies — is teaming with local health departments and AIDS groups to offer free HIV testing at stores in 20 cities.

But this CDC pilot program is different: It's an effort to train staff at the pharmacies to do the testing themselves, and perhaps make it a

permanent service.

"I'm excited. It's such a new and novel thing for us," said Sarah Freedman, who manages a Walgreens drugstore in Washington, D.C., that is participating in the pilot program.

At her pharmacy, the testing is done in a private room. They've also taken steps to make sure that a customer can very quietly request the test. For example, they've put out stacks of special test request cards — they look like business cards — at George Washington University and other nearby businesses. Anyone seeking a test can simply hand the card to the clerk, she said.

Only three or four customers have gone through with a test in the first few weeks.

"We get a lot of questions," she said. "Usually they get the information and they go and sit on it and think about it."

The OraSure test can also use a blood sample but the CDC drugstore program will use a mouth swab, said company spokesman Ron Ticho. The stick-like testing device is used to wipe the inside of the mouth, then it is put in a solution. If two lines appear, that indicates a positive test.

The company is seeking government approval to sell it over-the-counter for home testing. A decision is expected later this year.

The test is sold in about 40 countries. Ticho said he is not aware of another country where pharmacies routinely offer the testing.

More information: CDC: www.cdc.gov/hiv/

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