

New tests help keep health-care management closer to home

Testing for diseases made quicker, easier and cheaper

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"No blood. No pain. Instant results," is how Alexandra, 22, of Chicago describes the OraQuick Advance HIV test she took in April. Because she had had unprotected sex recently, she took the test for her "peace of mind," she says. The results: Negative.

"It's really easy," reports Alexandra, who asked that her last name not be used. "You just swab your mouth." No cost, too, because she took the test at the Test Positive Awareness Network (TPAN) clinic in Chicago, which provides free, anonymous HIV tests. (For other locations, visit www.hivtest.org or call 800-232-4636.)

Before the OraQuick, an HIV test required blood to be drawn and took a few weeks for results. Now, you can go to a clinic or test yourself at home with a \$40 kit from a drugstore. You use the kit to send a sample of your blood to a laboratory, which gives you the results in a week.

Kris, 54, of Highland Park was relieved to discover the new \$20 AZO Test Strips, which allow people to test their urine at home for urinary tract infections. "I've had UTIs before, so I knew when I got the symptoms, I probably had one," says Kris, who used the test in March. "It was positive, so I went right to the doctor and got medicine. If it had been negative, I might have waited a few days to see if the symptoms went away before I took the time for a doctor appointment."

While reliable home pregnancy tests have been on the market for years, more types of simple tests go beyond the realm of pregnancy, ovulation and fertility tests. They help you determine if you have -- or might have -- serious diseases, including cancer.

"Especially for people with chronic diseases like diabetes, these point-of-care tests help people manage their own health care," says Dr. Anita Varkey, internist at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood. "But patients should consider them complements, not replacements, for medical care because they don't take everything into consideration. The test doesn't know, for example, if you are a 20-year-old woman or 60-year-old man."

In addition to the home tests, Varkey encourages patients to explore tests that require trips to clinics or hospitals but have replaced more invasive tests. "The virtual colonoscopy, for example, can be an alternative to a colonoscopy for someone without risk factors for colon cancer," she says.

Here are some other tests, available at drugstore.com unless otherwise indicated:

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Here are some other tests, available at drugstore.com unless otherwise indicated:

Hepatitis B: For \$60, you can get a kit that enables you to send a blood sample to a laboratory, which will tell you if you test positive for hepatitis B.

Skin cancer: A 10-minute, whole-body, visual inspection of your skin for suspicious lesions is free if you visit one of the American Academy of Dermatology's clinics. To locate one near you, visit www.aad.org/public/exams/screenings/index.html, or call 888-462-3376.

Staph infection: If the nasty rash you picked up at the gym refuses to go away, you can rule out a potentially serious staph infection with the Xpert MRSA test. A \$42 nasal swab yields results in an hour so you can get an antibiotic ASAP. For more information, visit cepheid.com.

Cholesterol: If the word "lancet" doesn't make you wince, you can test your own cholesterol at home for as little as \$12 by dipping a test strip into a sample of your blood.

Drugs and tobacco: Want to keep your teenagers on the straight and narrow? Buy a supply of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or cocaine tests to keep on hand, which are less than \$20 a pop. To test for alcohol, you use saliva. For tobacco and marijuana, urine. For cocaine, you mail a urine sample to a laboratory.

Breast milk: Say you are nursing your baby but had some wine last night. To make sure your breast milk is alcohol-free, you can use an at-home test that costs about \$20.

Allergies: You're allergic to cats, you say. Prove it, says your spouse. A \$66.29 test kit tells you if you are allergic to 10 basic allergens, including dust mites and, yes, cats.

Menopause: A new \$13.99 menopause kit tells you your level of follicle-stimulating hormones (FSH), which will tell whether you probably have had your last period.

Kidney disease: For a free and easy (they check your urine) kidney disease screening near you, visit kidneymobile.org.

Premature labor: Premature labor can be predicted more easily now with the FullTerm Fetal Fibronectin Test, which involves a Pap-smear-like swab done by your doctor. It yields results in a few hours and costs about \$200.

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