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New UC San Diego Campaign Promotes Sexual Health — and Has a Quick Test to Prove It

“Good to Go” offers combined testing for HIV and five sexually transmitted diseases, providing some results in as little as 60 seconds and access to free treatment, if needed; updated clinic opens Dec. 10

Thirty or so years ago, the words human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome almost invariably provoked something close to panicked fear. HIV was poorly understood; AIDS killed more often than not.

These days, a deeper wealth of knowledge about the pathologies of HIV and development of effective antiviral therapies, especially when employed early, have rendered AIDS something closer to a chronic disease, not a death sentence. But HIV still causes AIDS and AIDS still kills and, in a terrible irony, the people most at risk of becoming infected with the virus — young males ages 13 to 24 who have sex with other males — are also among those least likely to be tested for HIV.

In a follow-up to its successful, 7-year “Lead the Way” campaign, a novel HIV awareness and testing campaign aimed at both high- and low-risk individuals, the AntiViral Research Center (AVRC) at UC San Diego School of Medicine has launched “Good to Go,” a new awareness effort that incorporates four tests for six conditions: HIV, syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, Hepatitis B and C. The HIV Rapid Test provides results in 60 seconds.

The program will be headquartered at a newly remodeled clinic located at 3830 Park Boulevard, San Diego. The new clinic opens December 10.



Fully enclosed booths provide privacy for consultations at the new AVRC Up clinic. The yellow booth with ball-background to the right is for taking selfies to declare that the participant has recently been tested and knows their HIV status.

“The Good to Go program is available to people 18 years and older who are available for a follow-up period of at least two weeks so we can provide results for all of their tests,” said Susan Little, MD, professor of medicine and an infectious disease specialist at UC San Diego Health. “It’s intended to encourage a younger, sexually active target population to get regular sexual health checkups for STDs and HIV, particularly gay and bisexual Latinx populations whose transmission rates have been rising.”

Nationally, HIV rates have dropped in recent years, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting in 2017 that annual HIV infections in the U.S. declined 18 percent between 2008 and 2014. But the decline has not been even among all demographic groups; in some, such as gay Hispanic males, the rate is rising.

“HIV incidence in many populations nationally is dropping, which is wonderful,” said Little. “We are interested in finding a way to continue this downward trend in HIV incidence. The change in thinking is to promote a sex positive/sexual health message rather than a disease prevention message. The Good to Go campaign will try to emphasize routine HIV and sexually transmitted infection testing as part of usual sexual health for all people who either do not know their status, or know that they are HIV-negative, and know that they need regular testing maintain their sexual health.”

The campaign features “the total test,” which combines the latest tests for conditions such as gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis, hepatitis B and C with testing for HIV. All testing is free to participants, requiring only a 30-minute appointment to have the testing explained, sign consent forms and take the tests, most of which involve answering a questionnaire, minor self-collected tissue sampling and a blood draw.

“When participants leave,” said Little, “they will know their syphilis and HIV antibody test results. Their gonorrhea and chlamydia results will be texted to them within hours, their HIV nucleic acid test results for acute HIV infection will be available online (using a unique access code) in 14 days. If a person has a positive test for acute HIV or syphilis, both of these take one to three days to return, they will be called with the results and asked to come in immediately for treatment. Participants with positive results for Hepatitis B or C will also be contacted so that appropriate care and treatment arrangements can be made.”

The campaign is funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health and a smaller pharmaceutical contract that provides free antiretroviral treatment for participants who test positive for HIV and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for participants who test negative for HIV and meet eligibility criteria for the PrEP prevention program.

Little said the new campaign is a further effort to reduce the stigma associated with HIV and testing, and to address changing public perceptions.

“A campaign focused on disease prevention, condom use and safer sex does not resonate with the current younger generation, which has not experienced the ravages of HIV/AIDS as earlier generations did,” she said.

“Unfortunately, these are some of the same people who are experiencing higher rates of new infections. We hope that a more sex positive, sexual health-focused message that tries to destigmatize the process of testing and treatment will resonate with the younger population — and with other populations at risk. We do have good treatment — and good prevention. We want people to know about both and to have access to the treatments they need to lead healthier lives.”

“Good to Go” will be offered at the AVRC’s new clinic, dubbed AVRC UP, at 3830 Park Boulevard. The site has been updated and aesthetically improved, with fully enclosed consultation booths for greater privacy, a phlebotomy (blood sampling) station separate from labs, all-gender restrooms and a selfie booth. Operating hours will be noon to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays.

The selfie booth recognizes the increasingly important role that social media plays in public health, said Marcel Reyes-Vermillion, marketing communications manager at AVRC.

“Social media is where dialogue about status and sexual health is initiated between strangers using hook-up apps, so we wanted to integrate it into our public health initiative. The selfie booth is a place where testers, upon knowing their STD results, including the HIV rapid test, can take a photo in our space with that day’s date to verify they are good to go. The idea is to share photos on social media apps in a way that participants can both have fun with and promote health testing.

“People know that testing should occur every three to four months so the date on their selfies helps keep track. Good to Go is a status-neutral, sex-positive campaign. We believe when our participants know their status and have a treatment or prevention plan in place, they are ‘good to go’ for a healthy sex life with partners well-matched based on their sexual health practices.”

For more information, visit www.GoodToGoSD.com or call 619-543-9340.

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