OTC Oral HIV Test...Yea or Nay?

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You may soon be able to test yourself for HIV at home—results in 20 minutes—with the OraQuick Advance Rapid HIV Antibody Test, purchased at the drugstore. It's a bit like a home pregnancy test. In this case, you swab your gums with a testing device, put it into a buffer vial and check the result. If the test wins FDA approval, will it help more Americans learn their HIV status—and help stem the epidemic in the process?

Ravinia Hayes-Covier, National Minority AIDS Council media representative, says an over-the-counter (OTC) product opens the door to wider testing. "We're at a point with HIV/AIDS in the African-American, Latino and poor communities where we have to provide access to testing in a variety of places."

Other educators fear the OTC test doesn't address HIV's social stigma, which keeps people from getting tested—and getting care if they're positive. Because of stigma, says Reginald Jackson of Chicago's Test Positive Aware Network, people won't simply pick up an HIV test at the drugstore to see whether they're positive. "Knowing your status is not the final step," he adds. "Without medical treatment, one could die from this illness." (OraSure says its home test will include phone numbers and web sites to help link people to counseling and treatment.)

Another concern: Oral HIV tests have sometimes given false positive results.

But Hayes-Covier says, "I think given the magnitude of the problem, [making testing more accessible] outweighs the concerns."

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