My heart settled in the bottom of my stomach in the waiting room of the Young Men’s Health Clinic in New York City. I was there to interview the director of the clinic, Dr. David Bell, and to get tested for HIV. I would be videotaped to show people just how easy it is to get tested. I hadn’t had unprotected sex. But I still had this nervous weight in my stomach, because I didn’t know what to expect.

Finally Dr. Bell invited me into his office. He explained the importance of HIV testing and knowing your status. He told me that if you’re having sex—protected or not—it’s best to get tested regularly. He also shared with me the two easy forms of testing that give rapid results.

I decided to try both forms of rapid testing: a mouth swab test, which was quite easy, and a finger prick, which takes a tiny sample of blood. The finger prick actually hurt a bit, and it didn’t help that I get light-headed at the sight of blood.

Fear of the Unknown

After taking the mouth swab and small blood sample from me, Dr. Bell put the samples in two small vials that would tell me my status after a brief 20-minute wait. That brief waiting period was the longest of my life. Even though I knew I hadn’t placed myself at risk of contracting HIV by having unprotected sex, I was gripped by fear—fear of the unknown. I started wondering if maybe I was born HIV positive by some fluke and would find out now. I know it’s not rational, but that’s where my mind went.

The test results eventually came back negative, but the experience gave me some insight into why people are so afraid to get tested. I can see how overwhelming the fear of a positive result is—so much so that some people choose not knowing over knowing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 180,000 to 280,000 people are HIV positive and don’t know it. What’s holding them back from the test? It is likely fear.

“I would want to know my status, but the possibility of a positive result frightens me,” says 19-year-old Kim, of Sicklerville, NJ. “If it came back positive, I think I would freak out, so I would prefer not to know.”

This is a common fear. But with advances in HIV/AIDS treatment, isn’t it better to know your status?

HIV is not the death sentence that it was in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. HIV-positive people can lead very long and healthy lives today. Even if you find out you’re HIV positive, you have an opportunity to get treatment and do what you can to prevent the spread of the virus.

Know Your Status

This is the time to put aside the fear and take control of your sexual health. The first step is learning your status. HIV testing is quite easy and readily available. If you don’t want anyone to know you’re getting tested, you can call your health care provider or clinic to confirm that they have confidential testing. This means that your health care provider can’t discuss your results with another person, including your parent or guardian.

And remember, if your visit will be charged to your parent or guardian’s insurance, then talk to your doctor and find out what information can be seen on the bill. Also, if you’re using your parent or guardian’s insurance and you’re under 18, your parent or guardian, in most cases, has the right to access your medical records. Call 1-800-230-PLAN (7526) to find the nearest Planned Parenthood Health Center for confidential, low-cost testing.

If we’re serious about reducing the number of HIV-positive people, we’ve got to be serious about waiting to have sex, because that’s the one sure way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. And if we choose to have sex, we have to get tested regularly, know our status and use protection each and every time we have vaginal, anal or oral sex. We can put an end to this epidemic, but we’ve each got to do our part. You can do yours by getting tested.