

MEDIA RELEASE

Health campaign offers couples the chance to **GIVE THE GREATEST GIFT**

Nothing more precious than trust and concern for your loved one's wellbeing

South Africans can boast that HIV testing has become part of our national way of life. Many of us take an HIV test every year and this has been central to our ability, as a country, to reduce the drastic effects of the HIV epidemic.

HIV counselling and testing (HCT) for couples is a big thing in HIV testing. Like other forms of HCT, couples testing is a road to better support and communication and to prompt ARV treatment, where needed. But it is also an opportunity to build love and trust between partners.

The New Start health programme brings a special couples' HCT campaign into the hearts of communities in four South African provinces on 13-28 February, setting up mobile testing units in community centres.

The way New Start sees it, the campaign offers people in intimate relationships the opportunity to "give your partner the *greatest* gift".

New Start's Senior Programme Manager, Ncamsile Nhlabathi explains: "The most valuable things in the world are things we cannot buy – good health, the respect and love of our partners, and the ability to care for our children.

"Knowing our HIV status helps us safeguard our health, make better lifestyle choices and be there, as parents, to raise our children. If you and your partner agree to go together and take an HIV test you are truly doing something of huge value for each other and for your family."

The couples HCT service is free of charge and is provided by experienced counsellors and healthcare workers from the New Start centres.

Where individuals test positive for HIV, New Start can immediately perform an additional test (known as a CD4 count) to see how far the infection has progressed and advise them if they need ARV treatment immediately or at a later stage.

How couples HIV testing works

Both individuals who form a "couple" come together to the HCT service. Couples may be married or unmarried, heterosexual or same-sex, and long-established or newly formed.

Both partners see the same counsellor at the same time and this offers them an opportunity to share some of their concerns and questions about HIV. It also allows them to talk about their results and the way forward in a safe environment. After they both take an HIV test and receive their results together, results, which usually takes. The counsellor gives them their test results and counsels them in a way that is appropriate to their results.

“We always try and offer a service that goes beyond the HIV test itself so that people feel capable of taking care of themselves in future, regardless of whether they test negative or positive,” says Ncamsile Nhlabathi “With couples testing, our counsellors are also able to assist partners together to deal with the emotional impact of one or both of them testing positive. We recognise that couples are all too often left to manage these difficult situations on their own.”

Distributed by the New Start programme and its parent-body, the Society for Family Health.

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Note to editors

The New Start programme was developed by Society for Family Health (SFH) in partnership with the government of South Africa and operates 4 centres that focus on HIV prevention. New Start is funded by the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). SFH is a registered not for profit organisation and is an affiliate of Population Services International (PSI), a global social marketing organisation.