

PrEP Q&A: *Using HIV Drugs to Prevent HIV Infection*

What is PrEP?

PrEP is short for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis. It is a new HIV prevention method for people who do not have HIV. It involves taking a daily pill to reduce the risk of becoming infected with the virus. On July 16th 2012, the FDA approved Truvada as the only PrEP drug for HIV. Approval was based on research showing that **when adults took Truvada consistently, it was very effective at preventing HIV infection.** The drug works by stopping HIV from making copies of itself after it enters the body. **PrEP is most effective in combination with other HIV prevention methods, like condoms.**

Who can take PrEP?

HIV-negative people at high risk for HIV infection are eligible for PrEP. PrEP is intended for use by HIV-negative people who meet one or more of the following criteria. To qualify, you should be:

- in a relationship with someone who is HIV-positive, or
- a high-risk heterosexual such as a sex worker, or
- a man who has sex with men (MSM) and is at high risk. You are at high risk if, in the last 12 months, you have:
 - had unprotected anal sex with a partner who is HIV-positive or whose status you did not know, or
 - had chlamydia, gonorrhea, or syphilis, or
 - had more than 10 sex partners, or
 - used poppers or meth.

However, PrEP has not yet been evaluated for use by people who inject drugs.

You cannot take PrEP if you already have HIV. Being HIV-positive and taking Truvada alone could make your HIV mutate and become resistant to drug treatment. Or, if you are HIV-negative and you become infected while taking PrEP, your HIV strain could become drug-resistant. These infections could be hard to treat, and the resistant virus could spread to other people. If you are considering PrEP, tell your doctor if you: are

pregnant or plan to become pregnant, are breastfeeding, or you have kidney, bone, or liver problems, especially hepatitis, now or in the past.

HIV drugs are used to treat people who are currently infected with HIV.

PrEP is the use of an HIV drug before a possible exposure to HIV in order to prevent infection.

PEP is the use of an HIV drug after a possible exposure to HIV in order to prevent infection.

Do I have to take PrEP every day?

You need to take PrEP EVERY DAY (one pill, once a day). It is not a short-term drug like antibiotics. It should not be used just for a weekend when you think you will have sex. **Do not take PrEP unless it has been prescribed to you by a doctor.** You can stop PrEP if you:

- have severe side effects, or
- get into a monogamous relationship with someone you absolutely know is HIV negative, or
- are entering a period of your life when you will not be having sex.

Talk to your doctor before stopping PrEP.

What do I need to do if I want to take PrEP?

To qualify for PrEP, you will need to test negative for HIV before you start. You will also need to get blood tests every 2-3 months for HIV and to make sure that PrEP is not causing damage to your kidneys or other organs. **While on PrEP, you still need to use condoms.** If a sex partner of yours is taking PrEP, you should still use condoms. You should talk with your doctor about your risk behavior and how to keep it as low as possible.

What are the Pros and Cons of PrEP?

To date, five studies have reported results of PrEP. Other studies are ongoing. Some are looking at PrEP in forms other than a pill. There are also studies looking into the effectiveness of less than daily dosing. PrEP effectiveness has varied widely. In one study, there were 44% fewer infections in people who took PrEP. In a second study there were 75% fewer infections, but in another, PrEP had no effect. **The key finding in all of these studies: the better you are at taking the pill everyday, the better PrEP prevents HIV.** Participants in the studies also used condoms, tested for HIV monthly, got tested and treated for other STDs, and received counseling on risk behavior and taking pills daily. For comparison, condoms alone are up to 95% effective at stopping HIV when used correctly every time during anal or vaginal sex.

There are many benefits of PrEP, and you should know all the facts. PrEP does not always prevent HIV infection. It is not 100% effective. PrEP requires that you take the pill every day. Also, you still need to use condoms, get tested and treated for STDs, and ask all sexual partners their HIV status. If you have HIV, or develop it while on PrEP, see a doctor immediately. **Taking PrEP is not enough to effectively treat an HIV infection.** PrEP will not protect you from other STDs. *It is important that you are able to see a doctor regularly if you are taking PrEP.* Stomach upset is a common side effect of taking Truvada. Some serious side effects include a build-up of acid in the blood, liver problems, kidney problems, bone problems, changes in body fat, symptoms of inflammation, and complications if you have hepatitis B.

How do I get PrEP and how much does it cost?

Your primary care doctor can prescribe PrEP. Some doctors will know more about it than others, so ask your doctor for a referral. Without insurance, the drug

can cost up to \$14,000 per year. Some health insurance plans will cover it. The number of insurance companies that cover PrEP may increase over time. There is also a medication assistance program to help those without insurance. At this time it's unknown whether Medicare and Medicaid will cover PrEP.

If PrEP isn't right for me, what else can I do to prevent HIV?

There is no risk of HIV if you don't have sex, share needles, or exchange body fluids. To further reduce your risk of getting HIV from sex, you can use condoms and barrier protection consistently and correctly, add water or silicone-based lubricants to condoms, have sex with fewer people, and get tested and treated for STDs. If you're in a relationship, you can both get tested. And if you're both negative, you can agree to only have sex with each other or only exchange body fluids with each other.

NOTE: If you are on PrEP, you still need to use condoms.

Condoms used during anal and vaginal sex still provide the best protection from HIV and other STDs.

Where can I find more information about PrEP?

CDC PrEP factsheet (PDF):
cdc.gov/hiv/prep/pdf/PrEPfactsheet.pdf

FDA approved Medication Guide (PDF):
gilead.com/pdf/truvada_medication_guide.pdf

Information about the medication assistance program:
start.truvada.com

Or call the HIV/STD Program at 206-263-2000