

PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PrEP) FACT SHEET

WHAT IS PrEP?

PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, is a new tool in HIV prevention and involves someone who is HIV negative taking anti-HIV medications on a daily basis to reduce their risk of getting infected. PrEP must be taken **before** engaging in activities where there is a risk of HIV infection, making it harder for the HIV virus to establish itself in the body. Taking PrEP daily ensures medication levels are maintained in the body so that there is effective protection when exposed to HIV.

The drug prescribed for PrEP is called Truvada, which was initially used to treat people living with HIV, and was approved for use among HIV-negative people in 2012 by the US Food and Drug Administration. While Truvada is approved by Health Canada as an HIV treatment, it has not been approved for use as PrEP. The World Health Organization as well as the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have endorsed and recommended the use of PrEP in individuals who are at high-risk of acquiring HIV, including gay men and other men who have sex with men.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PEP AND PrEP?

PEP, or post-exposure prophylaxis, refers to medications that you take for a month to prevent an HIV infection from establishing **after** you have been exposed to HIV. PEP should be started **as soon as possible**, and no later than 72 hours of the exposure. PEP is a useful prevention tool for guys who normally use condoms but have had a risky incident (i.e. condomless sex with an HIV-positive partner). For more info on PEP, visit checkhimout.ca/pep.

PrEP is a medication that **must be taken consistently on a daily basis** for as long as the risk of infection exists. If taken regularly as directed, PrEP can significantly reduce the risk of an HIV infection. PrEP is recommended for guys who have difficulty using condoms and may be at ongoing risk for HIV, such as having an HIV-positive partner. PrEP starts to become effective once Truvada has been built up in your system. Current research suggests it can take between 7 and 20 days for there to be enough medication in the body to prevent HIV.

WHO SHOULD TAKE PrEP?

Current guidelines on PrEP from the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS have identified the following risk factors where PrEP is recommended:

- Sex with a partner with HIV
- Have had a recent STI (e.g. chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis)
- Have multiple sexual partners
- Have a history of inconsistent or no condom use
- Currently involved in sex work
- Have had repeated courses of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

HOW WELL DOES PrEP WORK?

PrEP has been shown to be very effective if taken once a day as prescribed, based on the findings of several clinical trials. These studies have shown that daily use of Truvada is generally safe and can reduce the risk of HIV infection by over 90%. However, the effectiveness of PrEP decreases as pills are missed, so it is essential to consistently take the medication as directed. PrEP can also be combined with other HIV prevention measures (i.e. condoms) to provide even greater protection against HIV.

ARE THERE SIDE EFFECTS TO PrEP MEDICATION?

Truvada is considered to be a well-tolerated HIV medication, but it can still cause mild side effects, as well as possible decreases in bone density and kidney function. In PrEP clinical trials, less than 10% of study participants developed mild nausea, headaches, diarrhea, and/or weight loss, but these largely disappeared after a few weeks of taking PrEP.

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DOES PrEP PROTECT AGAINST OTHER STIs?

No. PrEP is only used for protection against HIV infections, and an active STI could increase your risk of getting HIV, even if you're on PrEP. Everyone who is prescribed PrEP is also required to complete regular STI screenings (i.e. every 3 months).

HOW DO I GET PrEP?

While Truvada is approved by Health Canada as an HIV treatment, it has not yet been approved for use as PrEP. Consequently, access to PrEP in Canada is limited, with some doctors in Canada prescribing PrEP "off-label", while others are not willing to write a prescription until the medication becomes approved for PrEP. This is a significant barrier for people trying to get on PrEP, and also means that some insurance companies may not cover the cost, requiring out-of-pocket payment.

According to current PrEP users, this is roughly what you will have to do to get PrEP:

- Talk to a doctor willing to prescribe PrEP and get a prescription
- If you have extended health insurance, talk to your insurer to see if you're covered
- Get approval or documentation signed off by your insurance company and doctor
- Get laboratory tests done (before starting PrEP and then every three months)

If you think PrEP might be for you, start by talking to your healthcare provider to see if they will prescribe PrEP. **You can also contact the Health Promotion Case Management (HPCM)* team at 604.812.2838 for further info and support.** Their case managers can discuss available options with you and connect you to appropriate services, including a health care provider willing to prescribe PrEP.

HOW MUCH DOES PrEP COST?

In BC, the cost of PrEP is only covered by some private health insurance plans. If it is not covered, it costs around \$900/month. Also, some plans carry a lifetime limit on total prescription benefits. Contact your insurer to see if PrEP is covered, and if so, whether any lifetime limits apply to your coverage.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO DO IF I DECIDE TO GO ON PrEP?

Before using PrEP, you will need to get an HIV test done, be screened for other STIs, and commit to regular follow up with your healthcare provider. Once on PrEP, you will receive HIV and STIs tests every three months and be monitored for possible side effects and kidney function. Your healthcare provider will let you know if your HIV test comes back positive and there is concern for continuing with PrEP.

**HPCM is a health and referral resource for gay men in Greater Vancouver, and can help you access appropriate services, including PrEP. If you think PrEP may be suitable for you, HPCM can help you get in touch with a healthcare professional who can work with you to get on PrEP.*

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