

Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV Prevention

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PrEP?

“PrEP” stands for preexposure prophylaxis. The word “prophylaxis” (pronounced pro fil ak sis) means to prevent or control the spread of an infection or disease. The goal of PrEP is to prevent HIV infection from taking hold if you are exposed to the virus. This is done by taking a pill that contains 2 HIV medications every day. These are the same medicines used to stop the virus from growing in people who are already infected.

Why take PrEP?

The HIV epidemic in the United States is growing. About 50,000 people get infected with HIV each year. More of these infections are happening in some groups of people and some areas of the country than in others.

Is PrEP a vaccine?

No. PrEP medication does not work the same way as a vaccine. When you take a vaccine, it trains the body’s immune system to fight off infection for years. You will need to take a pill every day by mouth for PrEP medications to protect you from infection. PrEP does not work after you stop taking it. The medication that was shown to be safe and to help block HIV infection is called “Truvada” (pronounced tru va duh). Truvada is a combination of 2 drugs (tenofovir and emtricitabine). These medicines work by blocking important pathways that the HIV virus uses to set up an infection. If you take Truvada as PrEP daily, the presence of the medication in your bloodstream can often stop the HIV virus from establishing itself and spreading in your body. If you do not take the Truvada pills every day, there may not be enough medicine in your blood stream to block the virus.

Should I consider taking PrEP?

PrEP is not for everyone. Doctors prescribe PrEP for some patients who have a very high risk of coming in contact with HIV by not using a condom when they have sex with a person who has HIV infection. You should consider PrEP if you are a man or woman who sometimes has sex without using a condom, especially if you have a sex partner who you know has HIV infection. You should also consider PrEP if you don’t know whether your partner has HIV infection but you know that your partner is at risk (for example, your partner inject drugs or is having sex with other people in addition to you) or if you have recently been told by a health care provider that you had a sexually transmitted infection. If your partner has HIV infection, PrEP may be an option to help protect you from getting HIV infection while you try to get pregnant, during pregnancy, or while breastfeeding.

How well does PrEP work?

PrEP was tested in several large studies with men who have sex with men, men who have sex with women, and women who have sex with men. All people in these studies (1) were tested at the beginning of the trial to be sure that they did not have HIV infection, (2) agreed to take an oral PrEP tablet daily, (3) received intensive counseling on safer-sex behavior, (4) were tested regularly for sexually transmitted infections, and (5) were given a regular supply of condoms.

Several studies showed that PrEP reduced the risk of getting HIV infection.

- Men who have sex with men who were given PrEP medication to take, were 44% less likely to get HIV infection than were those men who took a pill without any PrEP medicine in it (a placebo). Forty-four percent was an average that included men who didn't take the medicine every day and those who did. Among the men who said they took most of their daily doses, PrEP reduced the risk of HIV infection by 73% or more, up to 92% for some.
- Among men and women in couples in which one partner had HIV infection and the other partner initially did not ("HIV-discordant" couples), those who received PrEP medication were 75% less likely to become infected than those who took a pill without any medicine in it (a placebo). Among those who said they took most of their daily doses, PrEP reduced the risk of HIV infection by up to 90%.
- In one study of men and women who entered the study as individuals (not as a couple), PrEP worked for both men and women in one study: those who received the medication were 62% less likely to get HIV infection; those who said they took most of their daily doses, were 85% less likely to get HIV infection. But in another study, only about 1 in 4 women (<26%) had PrEP medication found in their blood when it was checked. This indicated that few women were actually taking their medication and that study found no protection against HIV infection.

More information on the details of these studies can be found at www.cdc.gov/hiv/prep.

Is PrEP safe?

The clinical trials also provided safety information on PrEP. Some people in the trials had early side effects such as an upset stomach or loss of appetite but these were mild and usually went away within the first month. Some people also had a mild headache. No serious side effects were observed. You should tell your doctor if these or other symptoms become severe or do not go away.

How can I start PrEP?

If you think you may be at high risk for HIV, talk to your doctor about PrEP. If you and your doctor agree that PrEP might reduce your risk of getting HIV infection, you will need to come in for a general health physical, blood tests for HIV, and tests for other infections that you can get from sex partners. Your blood will also be tested to see if your kidneys and liver are functioning well. If these tests show that PrEP medicines are likely to be safe for you to take and that you might benefit from PrEP, your doctor may give you a prescription after discussing it with you.

Taking PrEP medicines will require you to follow-up regularly with your doctor. You will receive counseling on sexual behaviors and blood tests for HIV infection and to see if your body is reacting well to Truvada. You should take your medicine every day as prescribed, and your doctor will advise you about ways to help you take it regularly so that it stands the best chance to help you avoid HIV infection. Tell your doctor if you are having trouble remembering to take your medicine or if you want to stop PrEP.

If I take PrEP can I stop using condoms when I have sex?

You should not stop using condoms because you are taking PrEP. If PrEP is taken daily, it offers a lot of protection against HIV infection, but not 100%. Condoms also offer a lot of protection against HIV infection if they are used correctly every time you have sex, but not 100%. PrEP medications don't give you any protection from other infections you can get during sex, but condoms do. So you will get the most protection from HIV and other sexual infections if you consistently take PrEP medication and consistently use condoms during sex.

How long do I need to take PrEP?

You should discuss this with your doctor. There are several reasons that people stop taking PrEP. If your risk of getting HIV infections becomes low because of changes that occur in your life, you may want to stop taking PrEP. If you find you don't want to take a pill every day or often forget to take your pills, other ways of protecting yourself from HIV infection may work better for you. If you have side effects from the medication that are interfering with your life or if blood tests show that your body is reacting to PrEP in unsafe ways, your doctor may stop prescribing PrEP for you.