

PrEP 101

WHAT IS PrEP?

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is an HIV prevention tool in which an HIV-negative person takes antiretroviral medication to reduce the risk of contracting HIV. Currently, the available form of PrEP entails taking the pill Truvada, which is made of two drugs—tenofovir and emtricitabine. When these meds build up in the human body, they can stop HIV from replicating and establishing an infection. In 2012, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Truvada as PrEP with the requirement that it be used every day, even during periods of minimal or low-risk sexual activity. Future studies are exploring intermittent dosing strategies (for example, using PrEP only during high-risk periods). Researchers are also looking into injectable, long-lasting forms of PrEP as well as different medications that could be used as PrEP.

WHO IS A GOOD CANDIDATE FOR PrEP?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends Truvada as PrEP for those at high risk of HIV, including: those in a relationship with an HIV-positive partner; men who don't use condoms when having sex with men; men who have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the past six months and who are not in a mutually monogamous relationship with an HIV-negative partner; heterosexuals who don't always use condoms for sex with partners who are themselves at high risk for HIV; and anyone who, in the past six months, has shared equipment when injecting illicit drugs or who has been in an injection drug treatment program.

HOW IS PrEP PRESCRIBED?

According to CDC recommendations, before prescribing PrEP, health-care providers should thoroughly assess a patient's HIV risk behaviors and also administer an HIV test. (More sensitive HIV tests can detect a more recent, or acute, infection; however, most home tests will not detect HIV during this "window period.") Tests for STIs are recommended. So, too, are tests for kidney function—tenofovir is associated with kidney toxicity—and hepatitis B virus (HBV), given that Truvada is also active against HBV and must be used cautiously.

It is recommended that providers prescribe no more than a 90-day supply of PrEP and to offer extensive HIV risk-reduction counseling, adherence counseling and condoms. It is recommended that, before renewing Truvada scripts, providers follow up with patients every two to three months to test again for HIV, to assess adherence and HIV risk behavior, and to provide ongoing support and counseling. Kidney function testing is again recommended three months after a person first starts PrEP and yearly thereafter. Tests for common STIs are also recommended every six months, even if a person has no symptoms.

HOW LONG SHOULD A PERSON TAKE PrEP?

PrEP is appropriate for periods of time when people have greater risk for contracting HIV. Those periods may be short or long or recurrent, depending on the individual. The CDC also recommends that before people discontinue PrEP, their providers should link them to HIV care (if a person has become infected) or ongoing HIV risk-reduction counseling and support. For people who have hep B, their providers should also discuss whether to continue treatment as a means to control their hepatitis.

QUICK TIPS

A knowledge of these topics will boost your PrEP IQ:

ADHERENCE

PrEP only works if you take it. Data from the iPrEx trial show that daily adherence reduces HIV risk between 96 percent and greater than 99 percent. Those who took four doses a week remained fully protected, and those who took two lowered their chance of getting HIV by 76 percent.

SIDE EFFECTS

Rates of side effects while on PrEP are low. Mild symptoms such as stomach cramps, headaches and loss of appetite may appear the first few weeks. Long-term use raises issues of kidney health and bone density; health-care providers should regularly test for kidney function.

DRUG RESISTANCE

If you are HIV positive and start PrEP, the virus can become resistant to one or both meds in Truvada. This mutated virus is weaker and less likely to transmit. Still, it is important you are not in the window period of HIV infection when beginning PrEP.

CONDOMS

PrEP is supposed to be used along with safer-sex practices such as condom use and regular HIV testing.

ACCESS

At over \$1,000 a month, PrEP is not cheap. Most insurance plans cover it, but you may have to work with your health care team before you get a prescription and coverage.

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