

Patient information from BMJ

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HIV: prevention treatment (PrEP) for people at high risk

If you are at high risk of being infected with HIV - for example, if you are a man who has sex with men, or if your partner has HIV - your doctor might suggest that you start treatment with antivirals to protect against infection with the virus.

If you want to know more about PrEP treatment, talk to your doctor.

What is PrEP?

HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. If you are infected by the HIV virus it damages your immune system. This makes it harder to fight off some types of infection, and easier for some cancers to develop.

Without treatment, HIV infection can lead to AIDS. AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**.

The treatment for HIV is called **antiretroviral treatment**, or **ART** for short. People with HIV who are being treated with ART take several antiviral drugs every day, for the rest of their lives.

These drugs help stop the virus from multiplying in the cells in their bodies. Controlling the virus in this way limits the damage that it can do, and helps stop people from becoming more ill.

But many people who don't have HIV also take a type of ART called **PrEP**.

PrEP stands for **pre-exposure prophylaxis**. Prophylaxis is another word for prevention.

If you are at high risk of being infected with HIV, taking PrEP reduces your chances of being infected.

Reasons why someone might be at high risk of HIV infection include:

- being a man who has sex with men
- having a partner with HIV

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- being someone who injects recreational 'street' drugs, such as heroin
- being a heterosexual (straight) man or woman who is considered at high risk of infection.

If you take PrEP, you will usually take two antiviral drugs every day. For it to work properly you have to take it regularly, as prescribed, without missing doses.

Some men who have sex with men might be able to take PrEP in a more as-needed or 'on demand' way, usually if they only have sex with men occasionally. But this type of prescribing might not be available everywhere.

Ask your doctor about how PrEP is available where you live.

PrEP has helped to reduce the spread of HIV. But it shouldn't lead to people becoming complacent. For example, research suggests that men who take PrEP might be less likely to use condoms.

PrEP can work well for many people, but it isn't a 'magic bullet'.

Using a condom can still be the safest way to have sex. This is partly because, while PrEP can protect against HIV in many people, it doesn't protect against other sexually transmitted diseases.

What will happen?

PrEP is hugely helpful in preventing the spread of HIV. But it's not possible to say whether it will work for you as an individual.

Also, PrEP it is not a vaccine, and it is not perfect. You have to take it every day, exactly as prescribed, for it to work properly.

Using condoms is still the most easily available way of preventing the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

If you think you are at high risk of HIV infection for any reason, talk to your doctor.

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