Information for people thinking of taking Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)
What is PrEP?

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) involves taking medication to prevent HIV infection PRIOR to potential exposure to HIV, unlike post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) which is taken after possible HIV exposure.

PrEP with a combination of two drugs: tenofovir DF and emtricitabine (or the brand name for this combination medication, Truvada) has been shown to be highly effective in preventing HIV infection if taken correctly. Truvada is an anti-HIV (or antiretroviral) drug that has been used successfully to control and manage HIV for many years.

If HIV is going to get inside the cells of the body, it does so within about 30 minutes of having sex, but it takes a few days before the infection is established (takes hold). HIV infection can be prevented if medicines that stop HIV reproduction (such as PrEP or PEP) are present in the body tissues at this time. In the case of PrEP, the medicines are present in the body before sex – that is, PrEP is started before a risk happens, and is continued at minimum for a few days afterwards.

There are two ways to take PrEP, either daily tablets or ‘on demand’. ‘On demand’ means taking tablets just before and a little while after planned sexual activity.

A daily PrEP study called PROUD, carried out in men who have sex with men across several UK sexual health clinics reported that PrEP reduced the risk of HIV infection by 86%. Another study using ‘on-demand’ PrEP (the IPERGAY study) also showed an 86% reduction in a similar high risk group.

A study in heterosexual people, called the Partners PrEP study, carried out in Africa reported approximately 90% reduction in new HIV infections in people taking daily PrEP correctly.

PrEP does not protect against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) therefore condoms should always be used as much as possible.
Who should consider taking PrEP

PrEP would be of benefit to people who are at higher risk of HIV infection, such as:

- Men who have sex with men
- Trans men and women
- People with partners from parts of the world where the rate of HIV is much higher
- People with an HIV positive partner who does not have an undetectable viral load

and

- People who do not always use condoms for sex

There are situations where PrEP may be particularly advised, such as in:

- Men who have sex with men who have had a recent sexually transmitted infection (particularly in the rectum/anus)
- People who have used PEP following sexual risk
- People who have chemsex

Who would not be recommended to take PrEP

People who are already HIV positive.

People who have an HIV positive partner who is taking HIV treatment, is currently ‘undetectable’ and has been for at least the last six months and where that person is their only partner.

How to get PrEP

Truvada the combination pill of tenofovir DF/emtricitabine made by Gilead is licensed in the UK for PrEP but is not yet (Feb 2017) funded by the NHS. The only way to get PrEP from a UK based pharmacy currently is with a private prescription that you will need to pay for. Some clinics do offer such private prescriptions but Umbrella is currently unable to provide a private prescription service for PrEP.

NHS prescribing of PrEP is due to change in the future, however, for now some people are choosing to buy less costly generic PrEP from online
pharmacies based outside the UK. It is possible to buy generic PrEP for personal use from non-EU suppliers and you do not usually require a prescription for this.

Medicines from other countries may have been made without adequate safety checks. It is important for to know that if you choose to obtain medicines online, you may receive poor quality medicines which may put you at risk of HIV, or other harm.

Only Truvada prescribed by a licensed medical practitioner and dispensed from an NHS pharmacy or through a registered pharmacy can be guaranteed to be a legitimate drug.

Speak to the clinic about what options are possible for you and the pros and cons of your options.

**How is PrEP taken?**

PrEP can be taken as a daily tablet or ‘on-demand’.

Please see the Umbrella ‘How to take PrEP’ leaflet for more detailed information.

If you take your PrEP pill every day, you are making sure that there is always some medicine in your body tissues. This will provide protection for a risk at any time during the period that PrEP is taken. This dosing option may be more suitable for people who have a risk four or more times every week.

If you take your PrEP pills ‘on demand’ – that is, just before and after a risk, it still works very well. This is also referred to as ‘event-based dosing’ or EBD. You do need to make sure that there is enough medicine in the body tissues by the time the sex happens. For on-demand dosing, you take a double dose of PrEP pills, just for the first dose when you are starting PrEP (2–24 hours before the risk), and for two further doses in the 48 hours after sex.

The on-demand method would not be advised for heterosexual people, trans men who are having vaginal sex or people with hepatitis B infection.

Speak to the clinic for advice about which method may be best for you.
More information about how to dose PrEP once you have decided to start can be found in the Umbrella ‘How to take PrEP’ leaflet.

If you only start the PrEP pills after sex, then this is post exposure prophylaxis (PEP). We usually give an additional medicine for PEP, so you should get in touch with the clinic as soon as possible if you start your PrEP pills after sex to discuss whether you need the additional medicine.

PrEP can only be used before you have sex. If you have already had sex and are concerned about that risk you need to speak to the clinic or A&E as soon as possible about the possibility of post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) which is a different combination of medications.

**PrEP and side effects**

The majority of people taking PrEP do not report side effects.

Possible side effects of taking the PrEP medicines include mild nausea, diarrhoea, bloating and headache, however these side effects will usually settle after the first month.

PrEP can also affect your kidneys which is why monitoring is important. This risk is higher if you are older, are very small in body size, have certain other medical conditions or already have reduced kidney function when you start PrEP. In the small proportion of people taking PrEP who developed reduced kidney function, these changes reversed on stopping PrEP.

We will be offering regular blood and urine monitoring of kidney function for people taking PrEP but this may only be in our clinics at the Birmingham LGBT centre.

PrEP can also reduce bone density by 1–5%, causing slight thinning of the bones, however this loss reverses after PrEP is stopped.

If someone has caught HIV and the virus is exposed to PrEP medication, there is a risk that the virus may become resistant to the drug. It is therefore very important to have an HIV ‘4th generation’ blood test before you start taking PrEP, and at least every three to four months whilst taking PrEP.
Speak to your Umbrella clinician to decide if PrEP is for you, and for support if you are thinking of starting or have already started PrEP.

Resources

- i-base.info/guides/prep – Information about PrEP written by sexual health specialists and community advocates

This information leaflet was originally developed by the Jefferis Wing at St. Mary’s hospital, London but has been adapted by Umbrella sexual health services, Birmingham.