

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP): Frequently Asked Questions**WHAT IS PrEP?**

PrEP (short for HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) involves taking a medicine to reduce the risk of getting HIV through sex or IV (intravenous) drug use.

- ❖ PrEP is recommended for people who do not have HIV but are at risk for acquiring it. This includes anyone:
 - Who was diagnosed with an STI (sexually transmitted infection) in the past 6 months.
 - Who does not use condoms consistently.
 - Who shares needles, syringes, or other drug injection equipment.
- ❖ Clinical trials have shown that PrEP is 99% effective at reducing the sexual transmission of HIV when taken as prescribed.
- ❖ Although there is less information about how effective PrEP is among people who inject drugs, studies show that PrEP also lowers HIV transmission in this risk group when taken as prescribed.

WHAT MEDICATIONS ARE USED FOR PrEP?

As of January 2019, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has approved 4 medications for HIV PrEP:

- ❖ **PrEP pills** may be used to prevent HIV transmitted through sex or injection drug use:
 - **Truvada pill** (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate 300 mg/emtricitabine 200 mg):
 - Is the preferred oral medication for daily dosing.
 - Is the only medication approved for on-demand dosing to prevent HIV transmission through sex (not IV drug use).
 - **Descovy pill** (tenofovir alafenamide 25 mg/emtricitabine 200 mg):
 - Is not approved for PrEP in those assigned female at birth.
 - Is an alternative oral regimen that can only be used for daily dosing.
- ❖ **PrEP injections** are approved to prevent HIV transmission through sex (not IV drug use). However, not all clinical settings are able to offer PrEP shots, and insurance coverage varies:
 - **Apretude shots** (cabotegravir 600 mg) are given every 8 weeks.
 - **Yeztugo shots** (lenacapavir 463.5mg) are given every 6 months.

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS?

- ❖ **SIDE EFFECTS:** Most people do not have side effects while taking PrEP, but mild symptoms may occur when starting the medication. Side effects usually fade during the first month of use. However, if symptoms are severe or do not go away, talk to your medical provider.
 - **PrEP pills:**
 - Common side effects include abdominal pain, nausea/vomiting, loss of appetite, and headache.
 - Taking PrEP pills after a snack or meal can help with stomach upset.
 - **PrEP shots:**
 - Some people will experience pain, swelling, or redness at the injection site.
 - Other side effects are similar to those of PrEP pills.
- ❖ **HEALTH CONCERNS:** PrEP medications are safe and effective when taken as prescribed. However, your medical provider will monitor for health issues while on medication.
 - **Truvada pills** have been associated with mild to moderate kidney toxicity and bone loss.
 - The risk of kidney injury is very low in patients without HIV. Your healthcare provider will monitor your kidney function with labs before starting treatment and regularly thereafter.

- The risk for bone loss is also low. Studies suggest that bone loss is greatest at the start of therapy but normalizes in most patients 6 months after stopping treatment. However, full recovery may not occur in adolescents.
- **Descovy pills** have less potential for bone and kidney toxicity, but use has been associated with mild weight gain and dyslipidemia. Your provider will check cholesterol levels yearly.
- **PrEP shots** have more potential for drug interactions, which your medical provider will review with you.

HOW OFTEN ARE MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS FOR PrEP?

- ❖ **INITIAL APPOINTMENT:** The first appointment includes education about PrEP, a review of medication options, and lab work. HIV testing is always completed before starting PrEP. If you are ready to start PrEP, you can begin taking medication right after the appointment.
- ❖ **FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENTS:** You will need to be seen regularly for labs, medication refills/injections, and to check on side effects and any signs of HIV infection.
 - **For PrEP pills:** HIV testing is repeated every 3 months, typically with other STI testing.
 - **For PrEP shots:** HIV testing is done every 8-12 weeks depending on the medication being used.

MORE FREQUENT FOLLOW-UPS ARE NECESSARY IF YOU:

- ❖ Develop significant medication side effects.
- ❖ Have been exposed to and/or have symptoms of an STI, including acute HIV:
 - **Common symptoms of acute HIV** include: fever, fatigue, muscle aches, rash, lymph node swelling, sore throat, joint pain, night sweats, and diarrhea.

HOW DO I TAKE PrEP?

- ❖ There are 3 different ways to take PrEP: as daily pills, on-demand pills, or long-acting injections.
 - You must have a negative HIV test within 7 days of starting PrEP.
 - You must take PrEP as prescribed in order for it to be effective.
 - You will be at higher risk for getting HIV if you miss multiple doses.
 - Do not stop taking PrEP without talking to your medical provider.

❖ Dosing Options

- **Daily PrEP** involves taking 1 pill every day:
 - Daily PrEP provides constant protection against HIV. It is for anyone who is at risk for HIV exposure on a frequent or unpredictable basis.
 - Truvada is the preferred oral regimen for daily PrEP.
 - Descovy may be a good option for people who have difficulty tolerating Truvada, including people who have kidney disease or osteoporosis (bone loss).
- **On-Demand PrEP** involves taking the Truvada pill as needed on a **2-1-1 schedule**:
 - Users will take 2 pills, 2-24 hours before a possible sexual exposure to HIV. Then they will continue taking 1 pill each day until 2 days after their last sexual exposure.
 - On-demand dosing is only approved for gay or bisexual men have sex with men (MSM).
 - On-demand PrEP may be preferred by MSM who have occasional risk for HIV that can be predicted 2 hours in advance. However, when compared to each other, daily PrEP is more effective than 2-1-1 dosing.
 - We don't know how well on-demand PrEP works for heterosexual men and women, transgender people, and people who inject drugs.
- **Long-acting PrEP shots** are given every 8 weeks or every 6 months, depending on the medication being used. Injections may be preferred in those who prefer to avoid pills or cannot remember to take pills.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR PrEP TO START WORKING?

- ❖ Most PrEP medications do not start working immediately.
 - This is because it takes time for the medications to reach and maintain protective levels in the blood and mucous membranes.
 - Therefore, it is important to continue using condoms not only while you are waiting for PrEP to kick in but also for the first few weeks after starting to allow time for maximal protection.
- ❖ The time to protection varies depending on the medication:
 - **For daily Truvada,**
 - You must take a pill once daily for 7 days to provide protection during anal intercourse.
 - You must take a pill once daily for 21 days to provide protection during vaginal intercourse.
 - **For on-demand Truvada,** you must take 2 pills, 2 to 24 hours before having sex.
 - **For the Descovy pill or Apretude shot,** it is unclear how long each takes to reach protective levels. Experts generally advise that protection begins about 7 days after starting treatment.
 - **For the Yeztugo shot,** data suggest that protection begins in 3 days (24 hours after all doses are completed on Day 2), reaching maximal protection in 21-28 days.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I MISS A DOSE?

- ❖ **For PrEP pills:**
 - Take the missed dose as soon as you remember. However, if it's almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule.
 - Do not take a double dose of PrEP pills to make up for a missed one.
 - An occasional missed dose of PrEP pills will not greatly impact overall effectiveness, but it is important to take the medicine as prescribed. If you miss doses frequently, you will be at higher risk for HIV infection.
- ❖ **For PrEP shots:**
 - If you miss an injection, talk to your healthcare provider and reschedule your visit as soon as possible.
 - If you miss multiple shots, use condoms because there may not be enough medication in your body to protect you from HIV. Talk to your medical provider for additional instructions.

WHAT ARE WAYS TO MAKE SURE I TAKE PrEP REGULARLY?

- ❖ Get into a routine. Take your PrEP pill around the same time each day, such as when you brush your teeth or eat a meal.
- ❖ Use a pill box with compartments for each day of the week, so you can see whether or not you've taken your pills.
- ❖ Download a free app to remind you when it's time to take your pills or visit your medical provider.
- ❖ Use a calendar to check off the days you've taken your pill and circle your next appointment date.
- ❖ Add a reminder on your phone for when your next PrEP injection is due.

CAN I STOP USING CONDOMS WHILE I'M ON PrEP?

It is important to continue using condoms while taking PrEP for multiple reasons.

- ❖ PrEP protects against HIV but not other STIs.
 - If you are not using condoms, you are more likely to be exposed to other STIs. Having an STI can increase your chance of getting HIV if exposed to the virus.
 - Many STIs don't have symptoms, so if you are not using condoms regularly, it is especially important to get regular STI testing (typically every 3-6 months).
- ❖ Even though PrEP works extremely well to lower your chances of getting HIV, there is always a small chance you could still get it. The best way to protect yourself is to use condoms with PrEP.

HOW WOULD I PAY FOR PrEP?

- ❖ Most health insurance plans, including Medicaid, cover the cost of PrEP without co-pays. This includes the medication, medical appointments, and lab tests associated with PrEP. Some health insurance plans may require prior approval for the medication.
- ❖ For people without health insurance or those with high co-pays, a variety of programs offer PrEP for free or at a reduced cost:
 - The Gilead Sciences Advancing Access program helps cover the cost of PrEP pills. Learn more at www.gileadadvancingaccess.com.
 - ViiVConnect offers a program to help patients pay for PrEP shots. Learn more at www.viivconnect.com.
 - Some states offer PrEP assistance programs. Some cover medication, some cover clinical visits and labs, and some cover both. Learn more at nastad.org/prepcost-resources/state-prep-assistance-programs.
 - As of May 2026, the **Health Brigade** is a local clinic that offers PrEP shots for those without health insurance (www.healthbrigade.org).

OTHER PrEP RESOURCES

- ❖ **Find a healthcare provider** to prescribe PrEP at prelocator.org.
- ❖ Learn more about how to protect yourself with the **CDC's HIV Risk Reduction Tool** at hivrisk.cdc.gov.
- ❖ For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/stophivtogether.

REFERENCES

- ❖ CDC, New York State Department of Health, UpToDate.