

Frequently Asked Questions About PrEP

“PrEP” stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis. The word “prophylaxis” means to prevent or control the spread of an infection or disease. The goal of PrEP is to stop the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) from taking hold if you are exposed to the virus through sex or sharing equipment (works) used to inject drugs. This is done by taking one pill every day, along with using other prevention methods.

Can people stop using condoms if they are on PrEP?

People on PrEP are encouraged to use condoms to protect them from some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancy, and to protect them from HIV if they miss some of their pills. But people struggle with using condoms for many reasons, including not having condoms handy, being caught up in the moment, having emotional or substance use problems, having a partner that refuses to use condoms, and even having a partner who threatens violence if condoms are insisted upon. PrEP offers another way for them to protect themselves and others from HIV.

Does PrEP cause an increase in other STIs?

Everyone who goes on PrEP must first be tested for STIs and get tested again every three months. This lets doctors find and treat these infections, even before the person may feel symptoms. Some of these STIs may not have been found if the person had not started PrEP and gotten tested. In addition, most STIs, such as syphilis, chlamydia and gonorrhea, can be cured, while HIV cannot.

If someone is on PrEP and has an HIV-positive partner who has an undetectable viral load (almost no HIV can be found in their blood), do they still need to use condoms?

The chances that someone could get HIV in this situation are almost zero, but we still encourage couples to use condoms. If both partners took all of their pills all of the time (this is called adherence), the risk would be very low; however, people sometimes forget to take their pills. Also, condoms provide protection against other STIs and pregnancy. People need to make their own decisions, in discussion with their partners, about condom use.

Does PrEP encourage people to have risky sex?

Going on PrEP is a responsible decision to protect your health and the health of others. It is a good choice for people who are unable to use condoms every time they have sex or want extra protection from HIV. Some people on PrEP even take additional steps to protect their and their partners' sexual health by reducing the number of people they have sex with, using female

condoms, or having sex with HIV-positive partner(s) with undetectable viral load(s). PrEP can also be used by people who inject drugs and share their works. Some methods are more effective than others depending on many factors, but what's important to note is that there are a variety of options for people to protect themselves from HIV infection, in addition to PrEP.

I heard PrEP is expensive and I don't have health insurance. What do I do?

The Virginia Department of Health has a supply of medication available to assist those without health insurance. The maker of Truvada (the pill used for PrEP) also has a program to provide free Truvada to people who meet income limits, and some insurance plans also cover PrEP. If you want to go on PrEP, your doctor's office, clinic staff, or HIV test site can help you apply for the assistance program or may be able to help you find another way to get PrEP.

Can I just take a pill when I know I am going to have sex?

PrEP doesn't work that way. You need to take a pill every day so that you have enough Truvada in your body to stop HIV from taking hold. It can take several days for your body to build up high enough drug levels to block HIV. If you have sex or share injection works but you haven't been taking your pills every day, you will have a higher risk of getting HIV. Also, PrEP is not a "morning after" pill. If you know you have been exposed to HIV, then contact your doctor within 72 hours to discuss other options.

For more information about PrEP, call the Virginia Disease Prevention Hotline
Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

800-533-4148

or visit <http://bit.ly/vdhprep>.