

# What is PEP?

PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis) is a 4 week course of anti-HIV drugs which may stop HIV infection becoming established if started soon after exposure to HIV.

## When should PEP start?

*You must act fast!* PEP may be able to stop HIV exposure leading to HIV infection. TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE PEP SHOULD BE STARTED WITHIN A FEW HOURS OF EXPOSURE. If you go to a doctor for PEP more than 72 hours (3 days) after exposure, it is not likely to work.

## Where can I get PEP?

You can get PEP from sexual health clinics and from GPs who specialise in HIV/AIDS. It is also available 24 hours a day from all hospital accident and emergency departments in NSW.

**Information on where you can get PEP is available by calling 1800 PEP NOW (1800 737 669).**

PEP is also available in some other parts of Australia and overseas. When travelling, contact a local AIDS Council or AIDS organisation for information about how to access PEP.

## What does being exposed to HIV mean?

Being exposed to HIV is any action that lets infected body fluids (like blood or semen) enter your bloodstream. It is not the same as being infected with HIV (being HIV positive), but it can lead to this.

## How does exposure happen?

You can be exposed to HIV if you:

- Have vaginal or anal sex with a person who has HIV
- Share injecting equipment with a person who has HIV
- Get HIV positive blood, semen or vaginal fluids in your eyes or an open sore

If you don't use a condom and your partner has HIV (or you don't know if the person has HIV) there is a high risk of exposure. Even if you use a condom there is still a risk if the condom is not used all the time during penetration, or if the condom breaks. Either person having sex can be exposed.

Oral sex is not considered a high risk, but it may be a risk if you have a mouth ulcer, broken skin or recently had dental work, and you get blood, semen or vaginal fluids in your mouth.

*He was very persuasive and said he'd pull out before he came. So I said 'fine'. And he did pull out but he got excited and left it a bit late and we weren't sure whether or not he'd done it in time - JEREMY*

*I thought he was negative. We shared a fit, and then he told me he was positive - KELLEY*

## How does PEP work?

HIV works by infecting some cells, then replicating itself and spreading to other cells. There is evidence that it may take up to a few days from the time of exposure for HIV to establish itself in the body. The theory behind PEP is that it prevents HIV replicating itself in those first cells. The cells then die naturally within a short time, without having produced more copies of HIV.

## Does PEP mean I can now forget safe sex and safe injecting?

No, safe sex and safe injecting practices are the best protection against HIV.

- PEP is not a vaccine against HIV
- PEP is not a cure for HIV/AIDS
- PEP does not always work
- PEP is a lot more unpleasant than condoms
- PEP is a last resort treatment for special circumstances, not for everyday

*I've been in a relationship for about four years and never had a condom break. I don't know what happened this time. I pulled out and there it was ... both of us were worried because my partner is HIV positive. I went to his doctor, who suggested I go on PEP - TOM*

*We were blasting speed all night. Our fits might have got mixed up. One of the guys was positive. He said I should find out about PEP - CAROL*

## Will PEP work for me?

PEP may prevent HIV infection, particularly if started as soon as possible after exposure and continued for the full course of four weeks, but there is no guarantee.

Most of the information about PEP comes from studies on health care workers or the children of HIV positive women being treated with anti-HIV drugs soon after birth. Studies have found that health care workers who took PEP after an exposure to HIV were up to 80 per cent less likely to become infected with HIV, than those without PEP.

## What is involved in taking PEP?

If you and the doctor feel that you might benefit from PEP then you will be started immediately on a four-week course of anti-HIV drugs. Treatments are most effective when taken exactly as prescribed. This means committing to a strict dosing schedule and possibly special dietary needs.

*The treatments made me feel pretty lousy. I had diarrhoea and nausea, but it got better after the first week. I don't think I would want to take them again, but it's good to know it's available - DAVID*

If you know that the other person is HIV positive it is important to make the doctor aware of this. Other information that may be important is what treatment they are taking (if any) and their viral load (the amount of HIV in their blood).

The drugs used in PEP are highly potent and often cause side effects such as nausea, headaches and fatigue. You will be closely monitored by your doctor to manage these side effects. Side effects are usually most severe in the first week and reduce over time.

*I hope I never become positive because there's no way I want to take these drugs for the rest of my life - COREY*

### How much does PEP cost?

Anti HIV medication is subsidised by the Commonwealth Government through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). There is a small charge for each prescription that is charged at the pharmacy. The cost is reduced significantly for a person with a health care card.

### Should I still have an HIV test?

Yes. You should be tested for HIV before you begin PEP, at different times while taking PEP and after you have completed your course of PEP drugs. Your doctor will discuss testing requirements and results with you in detail.

### What about other drugs while I'm on PEP?

PEP drugs can affect the way in which other drugs (prescription or recreational) work in the body. They can affect the way the liver processes other drugs. This can lead to an increase in blood levels of some drugs to a point that is dangerous or even lethal. For example, the protease inhibitor class of drugs, particularly ritonavir (Norvir), can greatly increase blood levels of ecstasy (MDMA), amphetamines, methadone, Valium, Rohypnol, anabolic steroids, ketamine (Special K) and Viagra. It is important to discuss with the doctor any other drugs that you are taking or intend to take.

*I had unsafe sex at a party. I panicked and then headed straight for the hospital. I was still out of it and didn't know what PEP was called. I had to tell the nurse what I'd done and that I'd heard about this treatment. It was bloody embarrassing but she didn't seem phased - DON*

*Taking PEP was a bit of a wake up call. I think I'd become a bit slack. But after thinking about the possibility of becoming positive, I'm sure I won't take a chance like that again - PETER*

### The facts about PEP

- PEP is a four-week course of anti - HIV drugs that may prevent you becoming HIV positive after an exposure to the virus.
- It is an important option to consider if you think you may have been exposed to HIV.
- You don't have long to act! If you think you've been exposed to HIV, you should see a doctor urgently and definitely within 3 days.
- PEP can have some unpleasant side effects, and can react with other drugs you are taking.
- There is no conclusive evidence that PEP will work in every case.
- PEP is not a vaccine or a cure for HIV/AIDS. The best way to avoid being infected with HIV is through safe sex and safe injecting practices.
- There is no guarantee that you will be prescribed PEP if the doctor believes that the incident was low risk for HIV transmission.

**CALL THE PEP 24 HOUR HOTLINE**

**1800 737 669**

**1800 PEP NOW**

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND YOUR NEAREST LOCATION

[www.acon.org.au](http://www.acon.org.au)

**If you think you've just been at risk...**

**PEEP**

**is a treatment that might stop you getting HIV.**

**ACT NOW!**

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