

HIV prevention: Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)

What is PrEP? How does it work to prevent a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection?

PrEP is a prevention tool used to reduce the risk of becoming infected with HIV for people who are considered at high-risk and are currently HIV negative. The prescription medication, Truvada, is a daily pill that contains some of the same medications used to treat HIV (tenofovir and emtricitabine). When taken daily, the medication works to block the pathways required for the viral infection to take hold in the body.

Who can benefit from using PrEP?

The use of PrEP is recommended for people who are currently HIV-negative, but who have ongoing sexual contact with someone who is HIV-positive — putting them at high-risk for infection. Moreover, PrEP may be for you if:

- You are not in a mutually monogamous sexual relationship (meaning you have sex only with one person and that person only has sex with you).
- You are a gay or bisexual man or transgender woman who has had anal sex without using a condom or been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the past 6 months.
- You are heterosexual and do not use condoms consistently and are having sex with partners whose HIV status is unknown to you.
- You have used injectable drugs in the past 6 months.

PrEP may also be used in the prevention of HIV transmission from mother to child during pregnancy, delivery, or through breastfeeding.

How effective is PrEP?

Clinical trials of this medication indicate that if taken correctly and consistently every day, PrEP can be between 96 and over 99 percent effective at preventing an HIV infection. Effectiveness increases when used in conjunction with other prevention methods, such as condoms and treatment for drug abuse. If not taken daily, there may not be enough of the medication to block the virus from taking hold and spreading. Once the regimen is started, PrEP provides maximum protection from HIV transmission during receptive anal sex in 7 days and within 20 days for all other sexual activities and injectable drug use.

What side effects might I experience while using PrEP?

In clinical trials, the most common side effects reported included loss of appetite, upset stomach, and mild headache. However, it was noted that many of these side effects went away after the first month of use. No severe side effects were reported and thus far, there are no known long-term side effects or associated health consequences.

How can I obtain PrEP at Columbia Health?

Prescriptions for PrEP and any associated medical services are provided at Columbia Health. The providers and educators at Columbia Health are committed to ensuring that the process of obtaining PrEP is simple, non-judgmental, supportive, and relatively rapid so that students feel as comfortable as possible. The first step to starting PrEP is to contact the Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) at Columbia Health's Medical Services.

- If you are enrolled in the Columbia Student Health Insurance Plan with Aetna, PrEP is covered. If you have a different insurance, providers and educators at Columbia Health are happy to assist you in getting insurance information to determine your coverage.
- There is a copay involved, but you may be eligible to receive assistance from drug manufacturer (Gilead) for the cost of the copay.
- If you do not have insurance, the New York City Health Department Enroller (available by calling 311) can provide assistance in getting PrEP through Medicaid or low-cost insurance and through payment assistance programs.

What else do I need to know about using PrEP?

Follow-up appointments with a health care provider are required between prescription refills. During these visits, they will administer an HIV test and check for kidney functioning. Typically, after the first two visits, follow-up appointments will be scheduled every three months (between 90-day prescription refills).

Online Resources

Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP):
health.columbia.edu/ghap

Medical Services: health.columbia.edu/medical-services

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On-Campus Resources

GHAP: 212-854-6655

Medical Services: 212-854-7426