

PEP information for African people



NOW THERE IS A TREATMENT
THAT MAY PREVENT HIV
INFECTION AFTER THE VIRUS
HAS ENTERED THE BODY

PEP

POST EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

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PEP:

- could stop someone getting HIV
- isn't guaranteed to work
- must be started as soon as possible after unsafe sex or a condom breaking or falling off - and definitely within 72 hours (3 days)
- is free of charge
- involves taking anti-HIV drugs for 4 weeks
- has side effects



Post

= after

Exposure

= a situation where HIV has a chance to get into someone's bloodstream

Prophylaxis

= a treatment to stop an infection happening

SO...

PEP

= a treatment to stop a person becoming infected with HIV after it's got into their body

Why has this information been provided for African Communities?

In the UK, African communities are one of the groups with the highest rates of HIV infection. It is important for all people from African communities, regardless of their HIV status, and their sexual partners to have essential information on how to prevent HIV during sex.

But if HIV is in the body isn't it too late and the person's now infected?

No. After HIV gets in someone's bloodstream it takes time (hours or a few days) before it permanently infects them. If someone acts within that short time they stand a chance of stopping HIV before the infection takes hold.

How could the infection be stopped?

Taking 2 or 3 anti-HIV drugs every day for 4 weeks might stop the HIV before it gets a permanent hold in the body. PEP is not a 'morning after' pill that's taken just once - it's taken for one month.

So, on PEP someone won't become HIV positive?

Research seems to show that taking PEP makes it less likely to become infected with HIV. But PEP doesn't work every time - some people who take it still end up with HIV afterwards and it's more likely to fail if the full course of drugs isn't taken properly or started soon enough.

How soon?

The quicker PEP is started the better - within hours rather than days. The longer the wait the more chance it won't work. After 72 hours (3 days) PEP usually isn't given because studies show it's unlikely to work by then.

Are the drugs the same as the ones taken by people with HIV?

Yes, it's the same anti-HIV medication that's taken by HIV positive people.

Is PEP a cure for HIV?

There is no cure for HIV. PEP can only stop HIV infection if taken very early on after HIV has entered the body and before the infection takes hold - within the first 72 hours (3 days). Once HIV infection takes hold and the infection becomes permanent then anti-HIV drugs can't get rid of HIV from the body. This is because the virus is now in parts of the body that the drugs can't reach. So once HIV permanently infects someone the drugs can usually control the HIV in their body but can never get rid of it completely.

Does PEP have side effects?

Yes, it can cause diarrhoea, headaches, feeling sick and vomiting, however most of these side effects can be managed with other medication. Because of the side effects some people taking PEP need time off work or study and some have to stop taking PEP. Side effects stop once someone stops taking the drugs. One Australian study showed among people taking PEP, side effects were mild to moderate for 2 out of 3 people and severe for 1 in 4. If someone is thinking about stopping taking the drugs, they should talk to their doctor first as PEP is unlikely to work if the drugs are not taken for the whole four weeks.

Where does someone get PEP from?

These places might give people PEP:

- **sexual health clinics (GUM or 'clap' clinics)**
- **hospitals (usually A&E or 'Accident & Emergency' departments)**
- **if you already have HIV try your HIV clinic if the PEP is for someone you've had unsafe sex with.**

Not all of the above places in every part of the country will have PEP or be able to give it. Family doctors usually won't be able to prescribe PEP.

I have unresolved immigration issues, can I access PEP?

PEP is considered to be a life saving emergency treatment and should be available to anyone regardless of their immigration status. If you are given a bill for PEP contact **THT Direct** on **0845 12 21 200** (charged at a local rate) immediately to help get the bill cancelled.

What if someone can't get to a place that offers PEP within 72 hours?

Once 72 hours are over PEP won't usually be offered so it is important to make every effort to get to a Sexual Health Clinic as soon as possible. If it's not possible to get to a Sexual Health Clinic that's open go to a hospital Accident & Emergency department because they never close (although there's no guarantee they'll give PEP). Check out www.tht.org.uk/pep or contact **THT Direct** for advice on finding a place that offers PEP.

How much does PEP cost?

For people who need PEP, there is no cost. The pharmacy at the NHS hospital or NHS clinic will provide the drugs for free. Private clinics or private hospitals charge for PEP which can be expensive.

We had unsafe sex ... The condom broke ... is it worth asking for PEP?

To see if PEP might be given visit www.tht.org.uk/pep. This web site will help work out how big the risk of getting HIV was and whether it's worth asking for PEP. People without access to the Internet contact THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200 or the African AIDS Helpline on 0800 0967 500 for more information on PEP and where to get it.

What are the chances someone will get PEP?

Guidelines have been given to Sexual Health Clinics and hospitals that help doctors decide if PEP should be given. A doctor will need to ask questions about what kind of sex happened, when and who with. It's worth thinking about PEP if you have migrated from Africa or are having sex with someone who has and:

- you had vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- you had vaginal or anal sex and the condom broke or fell off
- you are a man who has had anal sex with another man without a condom or the condom broke or slipped off.

Doctors might sometimes give PEP after oral sex, depending on the circumstances.

What kind of questions are asked if someone wants PEP?

Questions are about:

- the person the unsafe sex was with (to judge the chances they had HIV or not)
- the type of sex involved e.g. when it happened, was it vaginal, anal or oral sex, did ejaculation happen inside or outside the body?

The kind of questions asked can be seen at www.tht.org.uk/pep or contact THT Direct.

Will someone need to have an HIV test?

Yes. Before someone is given PEP they must have a confidential HIV test to check they don't already have HIV. They must also agree to be tested after taking PEP to see if it's worked. PEP won't be offered if someone refuses to be tested as taking PEP when a person already has HIV can have an impact on the person's future HIV treatment.

If someone's taking PEP does that make them immune to HIV while they're on it or once they've stopped taking it?

No. Unsafe sex while taking PEP could let more HIV into your body, making PEP much more likely not to work.

If after taking PEP someone's stayed HIV negative and then has unsafe sex again, they can become infected just like any other HIV negative person.

Now there's PEP does it matter so much if people don't use condoms?

Here's why PEP doesn't change the need for condoms:

- using a condom is more likely to stop HIV being passed on than PEP is.
- condoms don't make you ill with nasty side effects.
- you need a condom for as long as the sex lasts - but PEP lasts for 4 weeks.
- condoms are easy to access. PEP can be hard - sometimes impossible - to get.
- you can control getting hold of condoms but doctors decide if you should get PEP and they may say no.

How many times can someone have PEP?

Doctors decide who gets PEP and they're unlikely to give these expensive and powerful drugs to the same person time after time. So someone who keeps having unsafe sex will usually be offered help with having safer sex and won't be given PEP lots of times. Besides, the side effects often put people off wanting to take PEP more than once.

If I feel I or someone I've had sex with might have been at risk of getting HIV what can I do?

Check out www.tht.org.uk/pep, contact THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200 or the African AIDS Helpline on 0800 0967 500. Both can help you decide if it's worth thinking about asking for PEP or provide information on how to practise safer sex in the future.

Things to remember about PEP:

- PEP might stop a person getting infected with HIV
- it's not guaranteed to work
- it must be started as soon as possible after unsafe sex or a condom breaking or falling off and definitely within 72 hours (3 days)
- PEP is free of charge
- it means taking anti-HIV drugs for 4 weeks
- side effects are common and can be nasty but can be managed with other medication
- not everyone wanting PEP will get it - doctors decide who gets it using the information given to them
- PEP is not available at all clinics or hospitals.