



**Elizabeth Glaser  
Pediatric AIDS Foundation**  
Fighting for an AIDS-free generation

# Let's Talk about PrEP – Common Questions Answered

## What is PrEP?

Pre-exposure prophylaxis is an HIV prevention strategy in which an HIV negative person uses antiretroviral medication to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

## Why would I take PrEP?

PrEP is a reliable and effective way to prevent HIV infection.

There are different reasons you may start taking PrEP. Examples include:

- If you are HIV-negative and in a sexual relationship with a partner who is HIV infected
- If you are HIV-negative and have multiple sex partners and do not consistently use condoms
- If you engage in sex work with people with an unknown HIV status to make a living
- If you inject drugs and may be sharing syringes and needles
- If you have gotten sexually transmitted infections repeatedly
- If you find yourself using post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) repeatedly
- If you have had sex whilst under the influence of alcohol or recreational drugs regularly

## Does it even work?

PrEP is highly effective if it is taken consistently and correctly. This means taking a pill every day as described by your provider. Taking PrEP regularly helps to build a protective layer within your body that can protect when people are exposed to HIV.

## Are there any side effects?

PrEP is safe to take! Some people who take PrEP may experience different side effects for a short time, which are common when taking other medications, and these may include:

- Headaches
- Vomiting
- Nausea or stomach discomfort
- Diarrhea (running stomach)
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Dizziness
- Tiredness

The side effects, when experienced, generally stop after a few weeks. Most of them can be managed through counseling or medical advice on what to do or certain medications to take. For example, taking anti-nausea medicine or avoiding oily or spicy foods, eating dry foods, and drinking black tea/water with lemon if one feels nauseated or is vomiting. Additionally, taking anti-diarrhea medicine, avoiding milk, and drinking water with salt and sugar may help with diarrhea; whereas taking pain killers, drinking lots of water, lying down, putting a cold rag over the face, and massaging the base of the skull may help with headaches. Very few side effects will require discontinuing PrEP and most will go away after a few days or weeks.

### **If I start using PrEP does that mean I do not need to use condoms with my partner(s)?**

You should still use condoms! Even though taking PrEP regularly will prevent you from getting infected with HIV, it **does NOT** protect against pregnancy or other types of sexually transmitted infections like herpes, gonorrhea or syphilis. It is therefore always recommended to continue to use condoms unless you are in a monogamous relationship with a trusted partner.

### **What if I forget to take PrEP one day?**

If you forget to take a single PrEP dose, just take it as soon as possible within the same 12-hour period. But if you forget during that time, there is no need to double dose the next day, just keep taking it normally. Forgetting one dose occasionally isn't the end of the world – the important thing is to get back into the daily routine. If you start forgetting more frequently, PrEP will stop working and you need to talk to your medical provider.

### **When does it start working once I take it?**

Once you start taking it, it takes about seven days (seven doses) to have adequate levels in your body to be effective. PrEP should be taken once a day for as long as someone wants to be protected against the risk of getting HIV. During the initial seven-day period, you need to adopt safe sexual practices, such as not having vaginal or anal intercourse, or using condoms for all vaginal and anal intercourse.

### **How long can you take it?**

You can take PrEP as long as you need to protect yourself against HIV. Discuss with your health care worker on any plans to stop taking PrEP if any of the reasons or circumstances in your life change. If you test HIV-positive at any time, you will need to stop taking PrEP and will need to start taking HIV treatment.

### **Can I take PrEP intermittently?**

You can take PrEP for the periods you know you are at risk of acquiring HIV, stop taking it when you are not at risk, and begin again if the risk presents itself again—this is sometimes called seasonal PrEP. Seasonal PrEP just refers to using PrEP for certain periods (months, weeks, etc.) that you may be a risk. It is important to talk to a health provider about your plans for their guidance.

## **Can I drink alcohol when taking PrEP?**

Yes! There is no interaction known between alcohol and PrEP. It is advised to take PrEP during the day, like in the morning after waking up, to ensure the times do not collide with the time that you mostly consume alcohol to reduce the risk of forgetting to take it. But you can choose another time that works for you. PrEP can be taken with or without food. Taking PrEP with food may help with swallowing the pill and with some stomach complaints if you have any.

## **What if I'm pregnant?**

Being pregnant does NOT disqualify you from being eligible for PrEP. You can start and take PrEP during pregnancy and the breastfeeding period without any harm to the mother or the baby. It is safe and effective to take PrEP while pregnant.

## **How does it work if I am interested in starting to take PrEP?**

First, you need to visit a health care provider who will talk to you about PrEP and also ask you certain questions. The provider will also confirm that you are HIV-negative with an HIV test. If you are worried about taking a test at the facility, the provider can give you a self-test where you can take the test where and when you choose and come back to the health facility for a confirmatory test. Make sure to come back to the facility to talk to the provider who will then take other steps to initiate you on PrEP or advise if you should not take PrEP.

## **How does it work if I want to stop taking PrEP at any time?**

You can decide to stop at any time. However, you have to continue to take PrEP for 28 days after the last potential HIV exposure to ensure protection. You can also re-start at any time after an HIV test is repeated to confirm you are still HIV-negative. You should use other protective precautions such as abstinence and using condoms.