

What do I need to know  
about HIV PrEP?

**PrEP can support  
your sexual health  
and help to protect  
you from HIV**

## What is HIV PrEP?

HIV PrEP is a medicine that stops you getting HIV through having sex. HIV is a virus that affects your immune system if left untreated. The most common way to get HIV in the UK is through unprotected anal, vaginal or frontal\* sex.

PrEP stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis. 'Pre-exposure' means it is taken before sex and 'prophylaxis' means to prevent disease – in this case by stopping you getting HIV. If taken correctly, it is highly effective at stopping HIV being passed on.

HIV PrEP tablets contain two drugs called Tenofovir and Emtricitabine in a single tablet. These drugs have been used in HIV care for many years.

## Is PrEP for me?

PrEP is used by people who are more at risk of getting HIV. This includes:

- Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men
- Men and women from black African communities
- People from transgender and non-binary communities
- People who exchange sex for payment
- People who inject drugs.

**PrEP is free for anyone who is more at risk of getting HIV.**

\* frontal sex is an alternative term for vaginal sex used by some trans and non-binary people.

HIV PrEP is provided to you free of charge by NHS sexual health services in Scotland if you have had a recent HIV test that showed you do not have HIV, and:

- your current sexual partner or partners are living with HIV and there is a high level of the HIV virus in their body (sometimes called a **detectable** viral load)
- you are a man or a transgender or non-binary person who has sex with men and:
  - ⋮ you have had a rectal infection in the last 12 months
  - ⋮ or you have had anal sex without using a condom with two or more partners in the last 12 months, and you think you are likely to do so again in the next 3 months
- a specialist in HIV PrEP at the sexual health clinic feels that you are at high risk of HIV transmission.

In addition, you also need to be:

- aged 16 or over
- living in Scotland and able to attend sexual health services every 3 to 6 months for treatment reviews
- willing to stop HIV PrEP if you are no longer eligible.

If your life changes and you are no longer at high risk of getting HIV, then you may no longer need to take HIV PrEP. Some people choose to buy HIV PrEP online. If you decide to buy PrEP yourself, you can still get free check-ups at sexual health services in Scotland.

## Is there anyone who would not benefit from taking HIV PrEP?

HIV PrEP is not a treatment for people living with HIV. The HIV PrEP tablet cannot treat HIV on its own and should not be used for this.

If your partner is living with HIV, has been taking HIV treatment for at least 6 months and has an **undetectable** HIV viral load, you are not at risk of HIV transmission through sex. People living with HIV who

are taking effective HIV medication will usually have an undetectable level of HIV in their body. Someone who has an undetectable HIV viral load cannot transmit HIV through sex. This is sometimes called 'undetectable equals untransmittable', or U=U.

Someone who has an undetectable HIV viral load cannot transmit HIV through sex.

**PrEP is to prevent HIV.  
It is not a treatment for people with HIV.**

## Does PrEP stop me getting other infections?

HIV PrEP only protects you from the sexual transmission of HIV. PrEP does not protect you from other sexually transmitted infections. If you use HIV PrEP without condoms and lubricant you are at risk of other sexually transmitted infections like syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia.

HIV PrEP does not prevent pregnancy. Use contraception if you are at risk of an unplanned pregnancy.

**PrEP does not stop you getting pregnant and does not protect you from other sexually transmitted infections.**

## What will happen at my first appointment at the HIV PrEP clinic?

At your first HIV PrEP consultation, the doctor or nurse will ask you about your medical and sexual history. You will have tests that will check for HIV and STIs such as hepatitis, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. They will also check your kidney function if it has not already been checked.

It is important we make sure you do not have HIV before starting HIV PrEP. If you have had anal, vaginal or frontal sex with a man without using a condom in the seven weeks before you start HIV PrEP, we will ask you to return to the clinic to have your HIV test repeated. This repeat test will be scheduled to take place four weeks after starting HIV PrEP. This is to make sure an early HIV infection is not missed. It is important to return for this appointment because you can develop resistance to HIV medications if you start HIV PrEP when you already have undiagnosed HIV.

## How do you take HIV PrEP?

There are two ways you can take HIV PrEP, called 'daily dosing' and 'event-based dosing'. You can change between daily and event-based dosing, but speak to your doctor or nurse first. They will support you to make changes safely.

**Daily dosing** means you take one tablet every day. Taking HIV PrEP every day ensures protective levels of HIV PrEP in your body 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you're more likely to have unplanned sex or cannot predict when sex is likely to occur, daily dosing provides the best protection. You will be protected once you have taken seven HIV PrEP pills in a row.

**Event-based dosing** works when you know when you'll be having sex and can plan in advance. Event-based dosing **should only be used if your only risk of getting HIV is from anal sex**. Event-based dosing is when you take HIV PrEP pills before and after each episode of sexual activity.

**Speak to your sexual health service to help you choose the best way for you to take PrEP.**

This means you:

1. Take **two tablets** of HIV PrEP before you have sex. Ideally this should be between two and 24 hours before sex.
2. Take one tablet of HIV PrEP every 24 hours until you have had two sex-free days.

Event-based dosing is not an option if you have hepatitis B.

### Illustration of single and multiple episodes of sex and event-based dosing

① Before sex



**2 pills**  
2 to 24 hours  
before sex

② After 24 hours



**1 pill**  
24 hours  
after first dose

③ Then daily



**1 pill**  
Daily, until 2 days  
with no sex

④

⑤ Before sex

Sex  
**within**  
7 days of  
last pill  
→



**1 pill**  
2 to 24 hours  
before sex

⑥ After 24 hours



**1 pill**  
24 hours  
after first dose

⑦ Then daily



**1 pill**  
Daily, until 2 days  
with no sex

Sex  
**more than**  
7 days after  
last pill  
→



**2 pills**  
2 to 24 hours  
before sex



**1 pill**  
24 hours  
after first dose



**1 pill**  
Daily, until 2 days  
with no sex

How you take HIV PrEP depends on what type of sex you have and your own personal preferences. The doctor or nurse at the sexual health clinic will discuss what's important to you.

Make sure you feel confident with your chosen option and you know how to take HIV PrEP. It's easy to forget to take a tablet. Missing a dose of your HIV PrEP may put you at risk of getting HIV, so it's important to take PrEP as you have been told. Setting mobile phone reminders can be a simple way to help you keep track of when you take your HIV PrEP.

## Are there any side effects to taking HIV PrEP?

Around 1 in 10 people will experience mild nausea, diarrhoea, headache and bloating but these symptoms usually go away after about a month.

**Most people who take HIV PrEP do not get any side effects.**

Sometimes HIV PrEP can affect your kidneys and bones. This is why sexual health services will perform kidney tests before and during treatment and ask about your medical details.

## Does HIV PrEP interact with any other medications?

It is safe to take most other medicines at the same time as HIV PrEP. However, if you are starting any new medicines, always tell the doctor or nurse you are taking HIV PrEP so that they can check if they are safe to use together. **If you are using HIV PrEP do not take ibuprofen, diclofenac or naproxen**, or any other medicines from a group of painkillers called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

**Always tell your doctor before starting any new medications.**

HIV PrEP can be used safely with all methods of contraception.

HIV PrEP is safe for transgender or non-binary people who are taking hormones.

## When can I start using HIV PrEP?

You and the doctor or nurse should come to an agreement whether HIV PrEP or another option is the right HIV prevention option for you.

You can usually start HIV PrEP at your first clinic appointment. You are normally asked to go back after one month to make sure you are okay with the tablets.

## How will my health be monitored while I'm using HIV PrEP?

Every three to six months you will need a blood test for HIV and syphilis, a urine test to check your kidney function and swab tests for other STIs.

Every 12 months you will need a blood test to check your kidney function. If you are taking some other medications, or if you have high blood pressure, you might need to have a blood test for your kidney function more regularly than this.

HIV PrEP is not available from NHS Scotland outside of sexual health services and you cannot get an HIV PrEP prescription from your GP.

**While you are taking PrEP you will get regular STI and sexual health check-ups.**

## Can I stop using HIV PrEP or take a break?

You can decide to take a break from HIV PrEP or to stop using it altogether. You can discuss stopping or taking a break from HIV PrEP with a doctor or nurse, so that you are confident about how to do this safely. How you stop HIV PrEP depends on the sort of sex you last had. The doctor or nurse will give you advice about this.

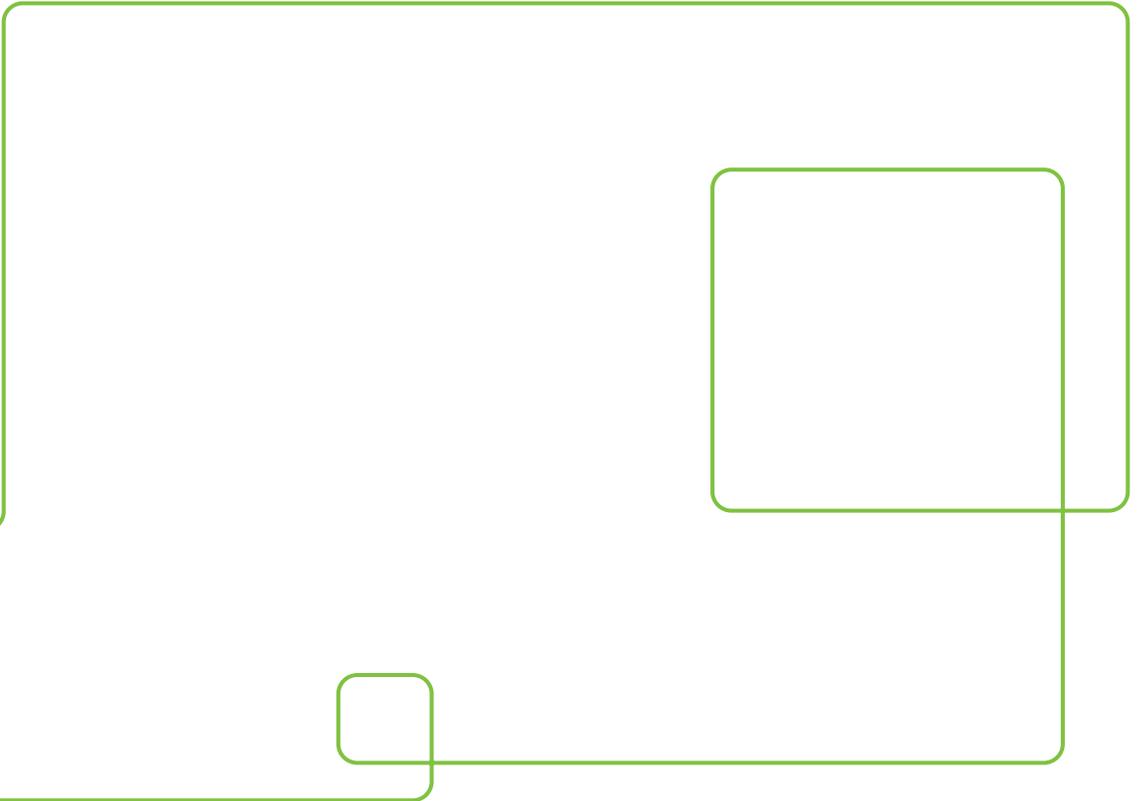
If you have a break from HIV PrEP and have any risks during this time, it is important to have another HIV test.

A medication called ‘post-exposure prophylaxis’ (PEP) can be accessed from any sexual health service or from accident and emergency services out of hours. You need to take it within 72 hours (ideally within 24 hours) of the risk event. PEP is effective at preventing HIV transmission following a sexual risk.

**You should always discuss any decision to stop taking PrEP with the doctor or nurse.**

## Further information

For further information, go to the [www.prep.scot](http://www.prep.scot) website. You can use the service finder to locate your nearest sexual health service. They will be happy to answer any questions you have. They can also arrange an HIV PrEP appointment for you.



© NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde 2022

Content developed with Terrence Higgins Trust Scotland, Waverley Care, The University of Edinburgh, NHS Ayrshire and Arran and NHS Orkney.

Design, editorial and production supported by Public Health Scotland.

**[www.prep.scot](http://www.prep.scot)**