

PEP Information Sheet

What is PEP?

PEP stands for post-exposure prophylaxis. It is a course of medication taken to reduce the chance of becoming HIV positive after an exposure to HIV. Studies have shown that there may be a window of opportunity in the first few hours to days after exposure to HIV where PEP medications can lessen the risk of HIV infection.

PEP needs to be started within 72 hours of the exposure and taken for 28 days (1 month). The earlier PEP is started the more effective it may be in preventing HIV. It is thought that PEP is not effective if started after 72 hours (3 days).

Not all exposures to HIV are high risk, and the use of PEP is primarily reserved for exposures which have the highest risk of HIV transmission. Your doctor will determine if PEP is appropriate for you depending on your risk.

PEP is used in the community setting for exposures arising mainly from sexual contact and injecting drug use. Whilst it may help to reduce HIV transmission it does not replace the need for safe sexual and injecting practices.

How do I take PEP?

PEP should be taken exactly as prescribed by your doctor. Depending on the type of PEP medication you have been given you will need to take tablets either once or twice a day. It is important to take the medication as prescribed and not to miss any doses. This is because the medication needs to remain at a therapeutic level in your body in order to have the best chance of working.

Will I have any side effects?

Whilst taking PEP there is the potential to experience side effects of the medication. The most commonly reported side effects of PEP drugs include: headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and tiredness. These side effects are usually worst in the first few days. Your doctor may prescribe medications to prevent these side effects, however sometimes people need to change the type of PEP medication they are on. Please let the doctor know if you are having side effects when you see them at your week 1 visit.

On rare occasions people have had severe side effects from some PEP medications. If you experience severe or unexpected side effects whilst taking PEP please contact your doctor or the PEP Telephone Information Line immediately.

Other medications can interfere with PEP treatment, so tell your doctor about any medications you may already be taking, including herbal treatments (especially St Johns Wort). Recreational drugs may also interact with PEP medications, so if you are likely to take these please talk with your doctor.

When do I need to see the doctor again?

You will see the doctor 1 week after starting PEP to collect the remaining 3 weeks of medication. When you have completed the full month of medication you will need to return to your doctor for an HIV test, and again 12 weeks after starting PEP. It is important to go to all of the follow-up visits as your HIV risk was considered high enough to be given PEP, therefore you have been at significant risk of HIV infection. The visit schedule is detailed below.

- **Baseline** You will have baseline blood tests including HIV, hepatitis A,B and C and syphilis. If you are not immune to Hepatitis B you may be offered to start Hepatitis B vaccinations. You will receive a 7 day PEP starter pack.
- **Week 1** You will get the results of your baseline blood tests and receive the remaining 3 weeks of PEP. You may also have tests for STIs (sexually transmitted infections) at this visit if you had a sexual exposure.
- **Week 4** You will have an HIV test after you have completed the 28 days of PEP medication.
- **Week 12** You will have a final HIV test at this visit due to the 3 month window period taken to develop antibodies.
- **Hepatitis C** If you also had risk factors for Hepatitis C transmission your doctor will do tests for Hepatitis C at the baseline and week 12 visits. It is recommended that you also have a test for Hepatitis C at week 26 (6 months) due to the 6 month window period for Hepatitis C.

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How effective is PEP?

Taking PEP after being exposed does not guarantee that you will not get HIV from the exposure. There are no scientific studies proving that PEP is effective when taken for sexual or injecting exposures. There is however some evidence from the healthcare setting and from other settings which may be transferable to sexual and injecting exposures. These studies estimate that PEP reduces HIV transmission by 81%.

Are there any risks associated with taking PEP?

PEP has been documented to have failed to prevent HIV transmission in some people. Taking PEP will not guarantee that you won't get HIV, but it may reduce your risk.

In the short term PEP can cause side effects (see over page). The long term side effects of PEP are unknown at this stage.

HIV Transmission

HIV can be transmitted through blood and body fluids such as semen and rectal/vaginal secretions. Transmission can occur during sex without a condom or through sharing equipment to inject drugs. Whilst you are on PEP you can not be sure that you have not contracted HIV. When someone first contracts HIV the amount of HIV in the blood is extremely high, increasing the risk of transmission to other people. For this reason it is important that you engage in safe practises to ensure that others are not exposed to HIV.

Can I have sex?

Taking PEP does not mean that you can not have sex. However, because your HIV status will remain unclear until the final HIV test is completed, it is important to continue to protect yourself and others. This could include discussing starting safe sex with a regular partner. If you need some assistance in how to do this talk to your doctor. There are also psychologists at the Victorian NPEP Service and the Sex, Health and Wellbeing Service that you can talk with should you wish to (contact details below).

Can I donate blood?

During this period you should not donate blood or other body tissues.

What about sharps?

It is recommended that you don't share any items that are associated with blood or body fluids, such as injecting equipment and razors.

What if I have another HIV exposure while I am taking PEP?

If you have another exposure while you are taking PEP please discuss it with your doctor as you may need to extend the length of time you are on PEP medications.

Talking about HIV risks

If you are taking risks in your sex life and feel that you want to change what's happening please call the Sex Health and Wellbeing Service—a psychology service focussed on men's sexual health (see contact number below).

HIV Symptoms

When people have been exposed to and infected with HIV they may develop signs and symptoms of acute HIV infection which usually occur 2-4 weeks after the exposure. Common symptoms include tiredness, fever, sore throat, headache, rash, and enlarged lymph nodes especially in the neck. People can get these symptoms for a wide range of reasons, for example a simple cold or sinus infection, so having one of these symptoms may not mean you are contracting HIV. If you do experience any of these symptoms please discuss them with your doctor immediately.

Where can I get more information about PEP?

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| • To find out more about PEP please visit the Get PEP website | www.getpep.info |
| • The Victorian NPEP Service has a PEP Hotline available 24 hours a day | 1800 889 887 |
| • HIV, Hepatitis, STI Education + Resource Centre | 9076 6993 |
| • Melbourne Sexual Health Centre | 9347 0244 |
| • Sex Health & Wellbeing Service (a psychology service specifically for men) | 9076 2653 |
| • HIV pharmacist at The Alfred | 9076 6916 |

Victorian NPEP Service



1800 889 887

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