

PrEP (PRE EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS)

What is PrEP?

PrEP is the use of certain medications to prevent the spread of HIV. The medications used as PrEP are usually used to treat people who live with HIV. However, when taken by HIV-negative people, it can prevent them from contracting HIV. When used as prescribed, PrEP is 100% effective.¹

SAMESH's position on PrEP

SAMESH recognises the remarkable potential of PrEP to help end the HIV epidemic in Australia, and strongly supports its use by people at risk of contracting HIV. SAMESH recognises that the greater the uptake of PrEP, the greater its potential to prevent new HIV infections. In order to realise this potential, SAMESH supports and urges the immediate listing of PrEP on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and the subsidies it provides.

Until PrEP is available under the PBS, SAMESH supports and encourages individuals to access it either through clinical trials, personal importation of generics, or through Australian pharmacies. SAMESH is committed to working with grassroots activists and community members to improve awareness and understanding of PrEP, and to maximise its uptake among those who want it.

The availability and prescription of PrEP should include guidelines for health professionals and community members that promote PrEP as one of many tools for reducing risks around HIV. The guidelines should emphasise the importance of taking PrEP as prescribed; the continued benefits of and need for condoms; testing for HIV and STIs at least every three months; education about treatment as prevention (TasP); and information on harm reduction for people who inject drugs.

PrEP and HIV prevention

PrEP is a relatively new prevention strategy in the response to HIV. In a very short period, however, several studies have confirmed that PrEP is the most effective tool available to prevent HIV. All recent studies have confirmed that when PrEP is taken as prescribed it is completely effective in preventing HIV. In other words, no one who took PrEP every day contracted HIV.

It is crucial to remember that PrEP does NOT prevent the transmission of other STIs, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, or herpes. All sexually active people should be tested regularly for STIs, with testing every three months recommended. PrEP is not a replacement for condoms. Instead, it should be considered an additional tool for preventing HIV. Condoms remain the best method for preventing other STIs. However, when taken as prescribed, PrEP is more effective than condoms at preventing HIV. Used together, PrEP and condoms provide the best possible prevention of HIV and other STIs.

¹ Grant, RM, et al. Uptake of pre-exposure prophylaxis, sexual practices, and HIV incidence in men and transgender women who have sex with men: a cohort study. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. Sept 2014, 14(9) p 820-829.

Other strategies may be used in addition to PrEP and condoms to limit risk. Particularly effective is treatment as prevention (TasP). This is the idea that HIV-positive people who are on medication and reach undetectable levels of the virus cannot pass it on to others. Several studies have confirmed undetectable viral load as an HIV prevention strategy is 100% effective.² This is especially important for serodiscordant couples, or couples where one partner is HIV-positive and the other is HIV-negative.

Other strategies include serosorting (choosing sex partners on the basis of HIV status), strategic positioning (choosing to top during sex as risk is much lower), and withdrawal (pulling out before ejaculating). Though these are all somewhat effective, they should be used only in addition to the prevention methods discussed above.

The Evidence

All studies have confirmed PrEP is incredibly effective at preventing HIV. The largest of these studies, iPrEx, found that, when taken every day, PrEP was 100% effective. Other studies in the UK, and Australia have seen similar results.³ In all studies, the closer participants followed instructions, the more effective PrEP was found to be.

Who should take PrEP?

PrEP is recommended for anyone at risk of contracting HIV. SAMESH encourages all men who have sex with men (MSM) to consider taking PrEP.⁴

Taking PrEP is a personal decision. Anybody considering taking PrEP should consider their own sexual practices, and talk with their doctor in order to determine whether PrEP is a good idea.

SAMESH supports the WHO recommendation that, in addition to MSM, other people at increased risk of HIV should consider PrEP, including people who inject drugs, people in serodiscordant relationships, and women who are at high risk.⁵

For more information about SAMESH and PrEP, please visit <http://www.samesh.org.au/prep.html>.

² Rodger A, et al. HIV transmission risk through condomless sex if the HIV positive partner is on suppressive ART: PARTNER study. Presentation at Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections, March 2014. <<http://www.chip.dk/PARTNER>>.

³ McCormack S, et al. Pre-exposure prophylaxis to prevent the acquisition of HIV-1 infection (PROUD): effectiveness results from the pilot phase of a pragmatic open-label randomised trial. *The Lancet*. 2 Jan 2016, 387(10013) p 53-60; , and VicPrEP

⁴ World Health Organisation. Guidance on oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for serodiscordant couples, men and transgender women who have sex with men at high risk for HIV: recommendations for use in the context of demonstration projects. July 2012. <http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidance_prep/en/>.

⁵ World Health Organisation. Policy brief: WHO expands recommendation on oral pre-exposure prophylaxis of HIV infection (PrEP). November 2015. <<http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/prep/policy-brief-prep-2015/en/>>.