



# HIV post exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

## I think I've been exposed to HIV!

There is a treatment that may prevent HIV infection. It's called PEP (post exposure prophylaxis). But act fast, the sooner PEP is taken after exposure the more likely it is to work. Delaying may mean the treatment will not work. If the exposure was not recent you should still go to a clinic for a HIV test as early diagnosis is important.

*It was down at the beach. It was dark and I thought he had a condom on. He was a bit rough and he took off as soon as he had finished. I am just feeling a bit scared and worried. – Patrick*

## What is PEP? (post exposure prophylaxis)

PEP is taking HIV medications for 4 weeks to reduce the chance of becoming infected with HIV. The drugs must be started within 72 hours. Most people develop some side effects; these are usually irritating, but not dangerous. Occasionally people can develop serious side effects.

## Does it work?

PEP reduces the risk of contracting HIV by about 80% after needle stick injuries. We do not know for certain how well it works after sexual exposure, but the information we have suggests it does reduce the risk, but is not 100% effective.

## Who should consider PEP?

Anyone who thinks they may have been exposed to HIV within the past 72 hours should seek information about PEP from a sexual health clinic, emergency department, or your local doctor.

PEP is used if you have has a risky contact, such as unprotected anal or vaginal sex or sharing injecting equipment AND the person is at higher risk of HIV.

Your doctor or nurse will help you weigh up the possible benefits and the risks of the medications.

*I had unsafe sex at a party. I panicked and headed straight for the hospital. I was still out of it and didn't know what PEP was called. I had to tell the nurse what I'd done and that I'd heard about this treatment. It was bloody embarrassing but she didn't seem fazed. - Don*

## Where do I get PEP?

Information about PEP is available from the Clinic 34 network in the Northern Territory, Monday to Friday, 8 am – 4.30 pm.

Emergency Departments at Royal Darwin and Alice Springs Hospital provide PEP after hours and on weekends.

In remote areas all clinics can access PEP via advice from Royal Darwin Hospital.

## How much does PEP cost?

This is free to you. The drugs are funded by the NT government.

## Should I still have an HIV test?

Definitely. PEP is not guaranteed to prevent HIV infection. Because PEP can delay the HIV tests we recommend you should therefore be tested for HIV at the time you start PEP and at 1, 3 and 6 months afterwards.

## What about sex while I'm on PEP?

Don't risk further exposure to yourself or others by having unsafe sex (or sharing needles) while on PEP. There is no evidence that PEP will protect against another exposure to HIV while you are taking the treatment.

## What about other drugs while I'm on PEP?

PEP drugs can affect the way in which other drugs (prescription or non-prescription) work in the body.

They also affect the way the liver processes other drugs. This can lead to an increase in blood levels of some drugs to a point that is dangerous or even lethal.

It is very important to discuss with your doctor any drugs (including alcohol and other recreational drugs) you are taking or planning to take while on PEP.

*I hope I never become positive because there's no way I want to take these drugs for the rest of my life. – Kym*

## Does PEP mean I can now forget safe sex and safe injecting?

No! PEP is not a vaccine or a cure for HIV/AIDS. It is not yet proven that PEP works and it is therefore a 'last resort' treatment. Safe sex and safe injecting practices are still the most effective way to prevent HIV infection and infection with other sexually transmitted infections and blood borne viruses like hepatitis B and C.

*Taking PEP was a bit of a wake up call. I think I'd become a bit slack. But after thinking about the possibility of becoming positive, I'm sure I won't take a chance like that again. – Pete*

## The facts about PEP

- PEP is a 4 week course of anti-HIV drugs that may prevent you becoming HIV positive after an exposure to the virus.

- It is an important option to consider if you think you may have been exposed to HIV.
- You don't have long to act! If you think you have been exposed to HIV, you should see a doctor urgently, and definitely within 72 hours.
- PEP can have some unpleasant side effects and may react with other drugs you are taking.
- There is no evidence that PEP will work in every case.
- PEP is not a vaccine or a cure for HIV/AIDS.

The best way to avoid being infected with HIV is through safe sex and safe injecting practices.

## Further information

### For more information contact Clinic 34 in your region

Alice Springs 8951 7549

Darwin 8999 2678

Katherine 8973 9049

Nhulunbuy 8987 0358

Tennant Creek 8962 4250

[www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc](http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc)

or

The Northern Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Council

Ph 8944 7777

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