What is PEP?

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

PEP stands for post-exposure prophylaxis. It means taking antiretroviral medicines (ART) after potentially being exposed to HIV, to prevent becoming infected.

- PEP must be started within 72 hours after a recent possible exposure to HIV, but the sooner you start PEP, the better. Every hour counts.
- If you’re prescribed PEP, you’ll need to take it as directed for 28 days. PEP is effective in preventing HIV when administered correctly, but not 100%.
- The risk of an exposure that results in the transmission of HIV from a known HIV positive source is low, approximately 1 in 300 (0.3%) from a high risk injury, such as a needle stick.
- Taking PEP meds can reduce the risk of transmission by 80%.

Is PEP right for me?
If you’re HIV-negative or don’t know your HIV status, within 72 hours, talk to your health care provider or an emergency room provider about PEP, if:

- You think you may have been exposed to HIV during sex (for ex. if condom or other barrier method broke or if no protection was used)
- You had an accidental exposure to blood (for ex. needlestick)
- You shared needles to use/prepare drugs
- You might have been exposed to HIV as a result of experiencing sexual violence. If there is concern over exposure to HIV as a result of sexual violence, you may have additional concerns besides HIV and there are resources available to you including testing, medical care, support, and/or evidence collection. For more information, please see “When you have concerns about sexual activity.” You can also call the Sexual Assault Response Line at 401-863-6000 for an immediate crisis response.
PEP Facts

- PEP must be started within 72 hrs after a possible exposure to HIV.
- PEP should be used only in emergency situations. It is not a substitute for regular use of other proven HIV prevention methods, such as safer sex methods like condoms and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP - taking HIV medicines daily to lower your chance of getting infected).

PEP is effective, but not 100%, so you should continue to use condoms and/or dental dams with sex partners while taking PEP, to protect from exposure to HIV again and to protect from other STIs, and to reduce the chances of transmitting HIV to others if you do become infected while you’re on PEP.

Does PEP have any side effects?

- PEP is safe but may cause minor side effects such as nausea for a few days.
- It is important not to stop the medicine without first talking with your provider.

Monitoring and follow-up after an exposure

- Based on the circumstances of your exposure, and information about the source of infection, your provider will make recommendations about testing for other blood borne infections, and/or preventative treatment/vaccines.
- Repeat blood tests may be advised at intervals while taking PEP.
- If you have ongoing exposure to HIV, talk to your provider about continuing HIV prevention medication with PREP, after completing PEP.

Contacts

- Your care at Brown University Health Services is confidential.
- If you think you might need PEP, call Health Services 24/7 at 863-1330 or go to a nearby emergency room as soon as possible.
- If you have experienced sexual violence, you can call the Sexual Assault Response Line at 401-863-6000.