Information on PEP for African communities

BE WISE ABOUT PEP

* A treatment that may prevent HIV infection after the virus has entered the body
DEFINITIONS

HIV: HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus and one of the main ways it can be passed on is through sex. HIV infects and gradually destroys a person's immune system until it becomes harder for their body to fight off infection.

AIDS: AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a term used to describe the point when a person's immune system is so badly damaged by HIV that it can no longer cope and opportunistic infections, such as tuberculosis and some cancers, can develop. In the past HIV usually led to AIDS, but thanks to effective treatment most people with HIV in Britain no longer develop AIDS.

Unprotected sex: sex when condoms are not used, or they break.

Safer sex: sex that doesn’t let one person's semen, vaginal fluids or blood enter the other person's body. Using a condom or not having penetrative sex are types of safer sex.

People from African communities have some of the highest rates of HIV infection in the UK. So it is vital to know our HIV status and to have information on how to prevent HIV transmission.

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You can find the contact details for all of the organisations we mention at the back of the booklet.

A PDF of this booklet is available on mambo.org.uk
What is PEP?

Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) is a treatment to stop a person becoming infected with HIV after it has entered his or her body.

Post
This means 'after'.

Exposure
A situation where HIV has a chance to get into someone's bloodstream.

Prophylaxis
A treatment to stop an infection from happening.

PEP:
- May stop a person from becoming infected with HIV.
- Must be started as soon as possible after unprotected sex or a condom breaking or falling off, ideally within 24 hours and definitely no later than 72 hours (three days).
- Is free of charge from NHS clinics and hospitals.
- Involves taking anti-HIV drugs for four weeks.
- May have side effects (these are usually manageable with additional medication).
- Is not guaranteed to work.

PEP should not be confused with PrEP (Pre Exposure Prophylaxis), a new prevention method involving the use of drugs to stop HIV infection BEFORE exposure. For more information on PrEP visit myHIV.org.uk
How does PEP work?
If HIV gets into a person’s bloodstream, it can take a few hours or days before the infection becomes permanent. If they start taking PEP quickly, they may be able to stop HIV taking hold in their body.

PEP involves taking two or three anti-HIV drugs every day for four weeks – it is not simply a one-off tablet, it is a course of tablets that needs to be taken every day as prescribed for one month.

Is PEP a cure for HIV?
There is currently no cure for HIV. PEP can only stop HIV infection if taken very soon after HIV has entered the body and before the infection takes hold - ideally within 24 hours of exposure and no later than 72 hours (three days). Once HIV infection takes hold and becomes permanent, PEP won’t work.

How effective is PEP?
PEP is most effective when it is taken within a few hours of exposure to HIV.

Although taking PEP makes infection with HIV less likely, it does not work every time. Some people take it and still become HIV positive. PEP can also fail if the full course of drugs is not taken as prescribed or started soon enough.

PEP is not a replacement for condoms, but is an emergency treatment measure.

How soon should I start PEP?
PEP has a better chance of working if it is started as soon as possible after you’ve been at risk of HIV infection – ideally within 24 hours. The longer you wait, the less chance there is that it will work. After 72 hours (three days), PEP is not usually given by doctors as research shows it is unlikely to work.

It is vital to get to a sexual health clinic or a hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) department as soon as possible after HIV exposure. A&E is the best place to go outside regular office hours. If staff tell you that they don’t offer PEP or ask you to come back another day, you should not wait – find another clinic or A&E department instead. For advice about finding somewhere that offers PEP, call the confidential helplines I Do It Right on 0800 0967 500 or THT Direct on 0808 802 1221.
Does PEP have side effects?

PEP may cause diarrhoea, headaches, nausea and vomiting. However, most of these side effects can be managed with other medication. If you take PEP and experience side effects, you may need to take time off work or study, and you may have to stop taking PEP. You should feel better once you stop taking it.

If you are taking PEP and decide to stop the treatment early, you should talk to your doctor first, as it is unlikely to work if it is not taken for the whole four weeks.

Where can I get PEP?

These places may offer PEP to people who need it:

- Sexual health (or GUM) clinics.
- Hospitals (usually in A&E departments).
- If you already have HIV and want PEP for someone you have had unprotected sex with or sex where a condom has broken or slipped off, you should both go to your HIV clinic.

In London, all sexual health clinics and NHS hospitals with A&E departments should offer PEP.

How much does PEP cost?

People who need PEP will not be charged for it. Pharmacies at NHS-run hospitals or sexual health clinics will provide the drugs for free.

Regardless of immigration status, everyone is entitled to get PEP free of charge because it is considered to be a life-saving emergency treatment. If you are given a bill for PEP by the NHS contact THT Direct on 0808 802 1221 for help to get the bill cancelled.

Private clinics and private hospitals do charge for PEP. Getting PEP privately will be very expensive.
When should I ask for PEP?

Sexual health clinics and hospitals have guidelines to help doctors decide if someone should be given PEP. A doctor will need to ask questions about the kind of sex you had, when and with whom.

It is worth thinking about PEP if you have:

- Had vaginal or anal sex without a condom.
- Had vaginal or anal sex where the condom broke or slipped off.
- You are generally unsure of your partner’s HIV status.

Doctors might sometimes give PEP after oral sex, depending on the circumstances.

For more information on PEP and where to get it, contact the confidential helplines I Do It Right on 0800 0967 500 or THT Direct on 0808 802 1221 or visit mambo.org.uk

Will an HIV test be necessary?

Yes. Before someone is given PEP they must have a confidential HIV test. This is to find out whether they already have HIV. They will also need to be tested three months after taking PEP to see if it has worked. PEP will not be offered if they refuse to be tested, as taking PEP if they already have HIV can impact on their future HIV treatment.

Does PEP change the need for safer sex?

PEP is not a replacement for condoms. Having unprotected sex while taking PEP could increase the risk of HIV exposure to your body, making PEP much more likely to fail. If your sexual partner is HIV negative, he or she could also become infected.

If someone remains HIV negative after taking PEP and then has unprotected sex, they can become infected with HIV just like any other HIV negative person.

Doctors and nurses decide who gets PEP and they are unlikely to give someone these expensive and powerful drugs time after time. People who keep having unprotected sex will usually be offered help to have safer sex but will not be given PEP repeatedly. Besides, the side effects are likely to put people off wanting to take PEP more than once.
Here are a few more reasons why PEP does not change the need for condoms:

- Using a condom is more likely to stop HIV being passed on than PEP is.
- Condoms do not make someone ill with unpleasant side effects.
- Condoms are only used during sex - but PEP is prescribed for four weeks.
- Condoms are easy to access but PEP can be difficult to get within a short time frame.
- You are in control of getting hold of condoms, but doctors decide if a person should get PEP and they may say 'no'.

Things to remember about PEP:

- PEP may stop a person from becoming infected with HIV but it is not guaranteed to work.
- PEP is not a substitute for condoms and should only be used as a last resort.
- It must be started as soon as possible after unprotected sex or a condom breaking or falling off, ideally within 24 hours and definitely no later than 72 hours (three days).
- PEP is free of charge from NHS clinics and hospitals.
- Taking PEP means taking anti-HIV drugs for four weeks.
- Side effects are common and can be serious, but can be managed with other medication.
- Not everyone wanting PEP will get it - doctors decide whether someone gets it based on the information given to them.
- PEP should be available at all sexual health clinics or hospitals with an A&E department, but isn't always.

For more information on PEP, HIV or other issues related to sexual health visit mambo.org.uk or contact the confidential helplines I Do It Right on 0800 0967 500 or THT Direct on 0808 802 1221
CONTACTS

I Do It Right helpline
0800 0967 500 - freephone
idoitright.co.uk
I Do It Right helps you to make informed choices from the various health, treatment and support services regarding sexual health. Available in English, French, Shona, Swahili and Luganda languages.

THT Direct
0808 802 1221 - freephone, including on most mobile networks.
tht.org.uk
tht.org.uk/clinics to find your nearest clinics
tht.org.uk/fastest to find out about Terrence Higgins Trust’s rapid HIV testing clinics.
THT Direct can answer questions about sex, sexual health and HIV, and put you in touch with services providing support around sex and sexuality.

NHS Direct
0845 4647 - local rate, available 24 hours a day.
nhsdirect.nhs.uk
NHS Direct provides advice and information on all areas of health including sexual health.

Mambo Online
mambo.org.uk
Mambo is the healthier lifestyle magazine for African communities in London.

myHIV
myHIV.org.uk
myHIV provides information and confidential support on a range of health and social issues related to HIV.

Freedoms Shop
freedoms-shop.nhs.uk
Provides low cost condoms by post.