

PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis)

BACKGROUND

Since its approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2012, PrEP has become an important and pressing issue in Australia. PrEP (or pre-exposure prophylaxis) has quickly developed into an HIV prevention tool that has the potential to effectively stop HIV transmission.

The word 'PrEP' doesn't refer to a specific drug, but rather to the use of medication to prevent HIV. So far the only medication approved as PrEP is Truvada, a combination tablet of two medicines usually used to control the virus in HIV-positive people. When taken daily by HIV-negative people it is more effective than condoms at preventing HIV.

EFFECTIVENESS

The best current research shows that, when taken daily, PrEP is almost completely effective at preventing the transmission of HIV. Two major studies have independently confirmed this. Known as iPrEx OLE and PROUD, respectively, both studies asked participants to take one tablet of Truvada every day. Among those who took the pills every day, there were zero new HIV infections. Even among those who missed an occasional dose, PrEP provided significant protection. However, PrEP was most effective when taken daily as prescribed.

BENEFITS

The clearest benefit of taking PrEP is the prevention of HIV. People on PrEP are reporting many additional benefits, less tangible but no less significant. One of these is a reduction of the stigma surrounding HIV and the related discrimination experienced by people living with HIV. PrEP is helping many people address their fear of HIV and improving relationships between negative and positive people. Together with treatment as prevention (TasP), or the treatment of HIV to the point that it can't be passed on, PrEP can entirely eliminate the fear of HIV. For many, HIV status is no longer a barrier to forming meaningful and fulfilling relationships.

SIDE EFFECTS

The main reason most people cite for not taking PrEP is the potential for side effects. Though PrEP users have reported some minor side effects (like headache and nausea), less than 5% of people experienced them. For most of these people, the side effects disappeared within a few weeks of starting PrEP. The vast majority of PrEP users experience no negative side effects at all. A recent review suggests PrEP is safer than aspirin, in that people who take it experience fewer and less serious side effects.

In any case, PrEP users are encouraged to visit their GP every 3 months, helping them monitor any potential side effects and to address them as soon as possible.

ACCESS

Currently in Victoria, PrEP can be affordably accessed in two ways: by taking part in one of the PrEP research studies or by personally importing generic versions of the drug through online pharmacies.

With the studies nearing capacity, the surest way of accessing PrEP is through personal importation. A group of community activists called PrEPaccessNow has developed a website, www.PrEPaccessNOW.com.au, which provides step-by-step guidance for accessing PrEP.

VAC regularly works with the group to ensure quality generics are easily accessible to those who want them. PrEPaccessNow operates a subsidy scheme to help people who cannot afford PrEP. More information is available on their website. Places are limited.

DOSING

The best current research shows that taking PrEP every day provides almost complete protection against HIV. Another study, known as IPERGAY, looked into on-demand PrEP, where it would be taken in limited doses only around certain periods of potential exposure. Though it was found to be highly effective, it was not as effective as daily PrEP. Until further research is conducted, daily dosing is recommended for the best, most effective way to use PrEP.

OTHER STIs

Many people are concerned about a potential increase in STIs due to PrEP usage. So far the PrEP studies have had mixed findings on this point. The largest study, iPrEx OLE, found that there was no difference in rates of STIs between people on PrEP and those not on PrEP. In all studies, people on PrEP had higher rates of testing for HIV and STIs than those not on PrEP.

Ultimately, every person makes their own choice about how to have safer sex, whether that involves PrEP, TasP, condoms, or a combination of them. PrEP may not be right for everyone, but it should not be ignored as an option simply because it might contribute to an increase in STIs. Ending HIV in Australia is a very real possibility in the next few years, but can be accomplished only with the help of PrEP.

FURTHER INFO

PrEP'd for Change is a community group dedicated to providing information and support to people interested in – or already taking – PrEP. You can visit their website at www.prepforchange.com.

More information about the PrEPX study can be found at www.alfredhealth.org.au/research/research-areas/infectious-diseases-research/prepx-study

If you want to access PrEP as soon as possible, we recommend contacting PrEPaccessNow on their website at www.prepaccessnow.com.au

More information on PrEP can be found on the VAC website at www.vac.org.au/PrEP