

# PEP



## What is PEP?

PEP stands for '**post-exposure prophylaxis**' and is sometimes called PEPSE (post-exposure prophylaxis following sexual exposure). PEP is a short course of medicine taken for 28 days that **can stop you from getting HIV after you might have come into contact with it**. It does this by preventing HIV from entering cells in your body. PEP is not 100% effective but there have been very few reports of people getting HIV after using it. Note, taking PEP doesn't protect you from pregnancy or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

PEP is not the same as PrEP. PrEP is a medicine you take regularly that can stop you from getting HIV. [Click here to find out more](#)

## When am I at risk of contracting HIV?

If you've been in close contact with somebody living with HIV, you might worry they've passed it on to you. However, **there are only some situations where this can happen**. HIV can be passed on by:

- anal or vaginal sex without a condom
- sharing needles when you are injecting drugs
- performing oral sex on a man (giving a blowjob) without a condom, although this risk is much lower.

It's really important to know that when somebody is living with HIV and taking effective medication, it lowers the amount of HIV in their body fluids. When the levels in the blood are very low this is called an "undetectable viral load".

**If somebody has an undetectable viral load they can't pass on HIV during any type of sex, even if a condom isn't used.**

There is **no risk** of someone passing on HIV by:

- kissing, cuddling, or holding hands
- sharing plates and cups or using the same toilet
- spitting, sneezing, or coughing.

If you think you might be at risk of contracting HIV, the best thing to do is speak to a sexual health doctor.



## How soon do I need to take PEP?

To have the best chance of it working, **you need to start taking PEP as soon as possible** after you might have come into contact with HIV. It is best to start PEP **within 24 hours** if you can. **You must start it within 72 hours** (three days) for it to work.

## How can I get PEP?

**Go to a sexual health clinic. If you need to book an appointment but there aren't any available, explain that it's an emergency.**

If the sexual health clinic isn't open, go to an A&E department at a hospital.  
**GPs (family doctors) cannot prescribe PEP in the UK.**

If you're under 16 you can go to your appointment by yourself. But if you feel comfortable telling a parent or carer about why you might need PEP, it's good to bring them along.

Note, **PEP can usually only be prescribed to those aged 15 and over**, although 15-year-olds weighing less than 40kg might also not be able to take it.

## What questions will I be asked?



**To decide whether PEP is right for you, you'll be asked why you think you might be at risk of getting HIV.**

You might be asked about the type of sex you've had or the way you've taken drugs. You will also be asked questions about the person who you think might have passed on HIV.

You might feel worried or embarrassed when you answer some of these questions but don't worry, **doctors and nurses are used to talking about these things** and they're just trying to find the best way to help you.

If you're finding it hard to answer the questions, or you don't understand what they mean, ask them to explain in another way. Remember that **you don't need to use medical words**: use the words you know, even if you think they're rude.

The answers you give will help the doctor or nurse understand your risk of getting HIV and work out if PEP would be right for you.

## I'm under 16, will my parents be told?

**If you're under 16, you will usually be asked to talk to a parent or carer about PEP if they don't come with you to your appointment. The doctor or nurse might also ask if they can speak to your parents.**

If you don't want your parents or carers to know, the doctor or nurse needs to be sure you understand all the necessary information before they can give you PEP. They also need to think about the risk of giving you the medicine compared to your risk of getting HIV.

If the doctor or nurse is worried about the reason you need PEP, for example, if they think you might be being abused, **they might need to speak to other professionals**, for example, social services.

## Does PEP have side effects?

The most common side effects you might notice when taking PEP are:

- diarrhoea
- tummy pain
- feeling sick
- being sick
- headache
- rash
- sleeping problems.



Speak to your doctor or nurse if you're worried about any of these.

## What if I need PEP again?

**It is best not to rely on PEP as a regular way of preventing HIV.**

If you find you need PEP more than once, you might want to consider taking PrEP. PrEP is a medicine you take regularly that can stop you from getting HIV. Speak to a doctor or nurse at a sexual health clinic about whether PrEP would be right for you.

[Click here to find out more about PrEP](#)

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**[www.chiva.org.uk/my-medicine-my-health](http://www.chiva.org.uk/my-medicine-my-health)**



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Find all the resources at: **[www.chiva.org.uk/my-medicine-my-health](http://www.chiva.org.uk/my-medicine-my-health)**

**Chiva** is a charity which works in the UK and Ireland to ensure children and young adults growing up with HIV become healthier, happier and more in control of their own futures.

**aidsmap** is a UK-based charity which changes lives by sharing independent, accurate, and accessible information about HIV and AIDS.