

Understanding the Difference Between PrEP and PEP

By Jo Everett

When we talk about preventing new HIV infections, two of the tools we often refer to are PrEP and PEP. There can be some confusion around the two, as they sound similar, but they work very differently. PrEP is short for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, while PEP stands for Post-Exposure Prophylaxis. PrEP is meant to be taken before a potential HIV exposure, while PEP is to be taken after a possible exposure to HIV as an emergency measure. Knowing the difference between the two is important in knowing what options are available to protect yourself from contracting HIV.

Anyone can decide to start PrEP by talking to their doctor. PrEP is most commonly taken as a daily pill, but it can also be given as an injection. Daily PrEP is recommended to be taken around the same time every day until an individual decides they are no longer at risk of contracting HIV. Adherence to this schedule is important, and when taken consistently, PrEP is about 99% effective at preventing HIV through sexual contact. Because of this, it is a good option for people who may have ongoing risk, whether that's a partner living with HIV, multiple sex partners, or inconsistent condom use.

In more recent years, PrEP has been developed as an injectable that you can receive at your doctor's office. Some brands can be administered every 3 months, while newer injectables can be administered every 6 months. Injectable PrEP can be more costly because it is still relatively new and not always covered by insurance. However, there are assistance programs available to help with the cost, and some manufacturers offer steep discounts for those who meet certain criteria.

PEP, or Post-Exposure Prophylaxis, is recommended after a suspected exposure to HIV. This could be from a sexual encounter, an occupational needle stick, or sharing needles with someone who has untreated HIV. In these instances, PEP can decrease the risk of HIV transmission when it is started within 72 hours of the suspected exposure, and the sooner it is initiated, the more effective it will be. PEP is taken for 28 days, followed by testing to ensure HIV infection has not occurred. If you need PEP treatment, go to your local ER or contact your doctor and let them know you believe you may have been exposed to HIV. Medicaid and most insurances will cover PEP treatment, and there are assistance programs that may be available to help cover expenses.

PrEP and PEP are both effective tools in the fight to prevent HIV, giving people options and putting control back in their hands when it comes to their health.

If you have questions about PrEP or PEP, or think one of these might be right for you, reach out to RiverStone Health HIV Services Program at 406.247.3305 or talk to your doctor.

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