



I think I've been exposed to HIV!

Now there is a treatment that may prevent infection.

It's called PEP (post exposure prophylaxis)

But act fast. Delaying may mean the treatment won't work.

What does being exposed to HIV mean?

Being exposed to HIV means any action or behaviour that lets infected body fluids (like blood or semen) enter your body. It is not the same as being infected with HIV (being HIV positive), but it could lead to this.

How does exposure happen?

You can be exposed to HIV if you:

- have vaginal or anal sex with a person who has HIV
- share needles with someone who has HIV
- get HIV positive blood in your eyes or in an open sore

However, you might not know that your partner or contact has HIV

If you don't use a condom there is a high risk of exposure. Even if you use a condom there will be a risk if the condom is not used all the time during penetration, or if the condom breaks.

Either person having sex could be exposed.

Oral sex is not considered a high risk, but it may be a risk if you have a mouth ulcer or other broken skin and the person ejaculates (cums) in your mouth.

It was down at Vestey's. It was dark and I thought he had a condom on. He was a bit rough and he took off as soon as he had finished. I am just feeling a bit scared and worried – Patrick

I thought he was negative. We shared a fit, and then he told me he was positive – Kelley

I hope I never become positive because there's no way I want to take these drugs for the rest of my life – Kym

So what is this new treatment?

The new treatment is called PEP (post exposure prophylaxis). ***It is a 4-week course of drugs that you can take if you have been exposed to HIV.*** The PEP drugs, which must be prescribed by a doctor, are actually the same drugs that are used for people being treated for HIV.

When should I take the drugs?

PEP may be able to stop exposure to HIV from leading to infection but you must act fast. ***To be most effective it should be started within a few hours of exposure.*** If you seek PEP more than 72 hours after exposure it is much less likely to be of use.

How does PEP work?

Like any virus, HIV works by infecting certain cells and then produces more virus in those cells. It takes a few days for this process to happen and the aim of PEP is to prevent the reproduction of virus in those first cells. These infected cells then die naturally in the body without new copies of HIV being produced to infect other cells.

Does PEP mean I can now forget safe sex and safe injecting?

No! PEP is not a vaccine or a cure for HIV/AIDS. It is not yet proven that PEP works and it is therefore a "last resort" treatment. Safe sex and safe injecting practices are still the most effective way to prevent HIV infection and infection with other sexually transmitted infections and blood borne viruses like hepatitis B and C.

Will PEP work for me?

PEP may prevent HIV infection, particularly if started very soon after exposure and continued for the full four week course. It is not yet proven but results are encouraging.

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Most of the information about PEP comes from studies on health care workers who were given PEP after needle-stick injuries. A study in the US found that those health care workers who took PEP after an exposure to HIV were up to 80% less likely to become infected than those who did not.

Other research supporting the use of PEP comes from studies where the children of HIV-positive mothers were treated with anti-HIV drugs soon after birth. There is also support for the use of PEP from studies using animals. At this stage, the long-term safety of anti-HIV drugs used in this way is unknown.

Is the course of drugs easy to follow?

If you and your doctor feel that you might benefit from PEP you will be started on a four-week course of drugs.

For the best result you will need to take these drugs exactly as prescribed.

It is also important to tell your doctor if you know that the person involved in your exposure is HIV positive. Other information that may be important is what treatment they are on, if any, and what their viral load is (the amount of HIV present in their bloodstream).

The drugs used in PEP are highly potent and often cause side effects such as nausea, headaches and fatigue. You will need to be closely monitored by your doctor during the course of PEP to manage these side effects.

Where do I get PEP?

PEP is available from Clinic 34, Ground Floor Health House, 87 Mitchell St, Darwin. Monday – Friday, 8 am – 4.30 pm. It is also available from the Emergency Department at Royal Darwin Hospital after hours and on weekends.

PEP is not currently available from General Practitioners.

How much does PEP cost?

This is free to you. The drugs are funded by the NT government.

Should I still have an HIV test?

Definitely. PEP is not guaranteed to prevent HIV infection. You should therefore be tested for HIV at the time you start PEP and at one, three and six months afterwards.

What about sex while I'm on PEP?

Don't risk further exposure to yourself or others by having unsafe sex (or sharing needles) while on

PEP. There is no evidence that PEP will protect against another exposure to HIV while you are taking the treatment.

What about other drugs while I'm on PEP?

PEP drugs can affect the way in which other drugs (prescription or non-prescription) work in the body. They also affect the way the liver processes other drugs. This can lead to an increase in blood levels of some drugs to a point that is dangerous or even lethal.

It is very important to discuss with your doctor any drugs (including alcohol and other recreational drugs) you are taking or planning to take while on PEP.

Taking PEP was a bit of a wake up call. I think I'd become a bit slack. But after thinking about the possibility of becoming positive, I'm sure I won't take a chance like that again – Pete

I had unsafe sex at a party. I panicked and headed straight for the hospital. I was still out of it and didn't know what PEP was called. I had to tell the nurse what I'd done and that I'd heard about this treatment. It was bloody embarrassing but she didn't seem phased - Don

The facts about PEP

- PEP is a four week course of anti-HIV drugs that may prevent you becoming HIV positive after an exposure to the virus.
- It is an important option to consider if you think you may have been exposed to HIV.
- You don't have long to act! If you think you have been exposed to HIV, you should see a doctor urgently, and definitely within 72 hours.
- PEP can have some unpleasant side effects and may react with other drugs you are taking.
- There is no conclusive evidence that PEP will work in every case.
- PEP is not a vaccine or a cure for HIV/AIDS. The best way to avoid being infected with HIV is through safe sex and safe injecting practices.

For more information about PEP telephone Clinic 34:

Darwin	8999 2678
Katherine	8973 9049
TennantCreek	8962 4603
Alice springs	8951 7549
Nhulunbuy	8987 0354

OR

The Northern Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Council 8941 1711

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