

# PEP or Post Exposure Prophylaxis



PEP is a course of anti-HIV medication that anyone can take if they are concerned they have been exposed to HIV through unsafe sex, a broken or slipped condom, needle-stick injury or through sharing equipment while injecting drugs within the last 72 hours.

It is thought that PEP may significantly reduce the risk of acquiring HIV if you are exposed to it; however, it's not proven to stop HIV transmission, so it shouldn't be used instead of condoms.

Just because you've had a risky experience doesn't mean you need to have PEP.

This is why it's important to talk to a doctor who is trained in anti-HIV medications, a sexual health service or emergency health service.

They will help you to establish risk factors and decide if it's right for you.

## What are you going to be reading about?...

- Things you and your doctor will talk about
- When should you take PEP?
- How do you take PEP?
- Does PEP have any side-effects?
- Do you need to continue seeing your doctor after you've finished taking PEP?
- Where you go to get PEP
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- Places that prescribe PEP

## Things you and your doctor will talk about

When deciding if you should take PEP, you and your doctor will talk about your 'risk factors'.

It will include talking about what happened to make you think you may need PEP, how much time has passed since the incident and what makes you think the person you had the risky event with may be HIV-positive.

Statistics show that certain groups of people are more likely to have HIV than others, and while sex

workers are not at high risk of getting HIV, certain behaviours are more likely to increase the chances of transmission.

Given that we know so little about our clients and their behaviours, you have good reason to expect to be given PEP if you want it after a condom break. Your doctor will talk to you about this and discuss what it means for you.

## When should you take PEP?

PEP works best if taken as soon as possible after the risk event, although you can take it up to 72 hours (3 days) later.

If you have a broken condom for example, it's ideal if you can get to a sexual health service that provides PEP within 2 – 3 hours.

If it's more than 72 hours later, it's still a good idea to talk to your doctor or sexual health service because they will be able to advise when to check for sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and take blood tests and check for other STIs.

Importantly, they can talk through what happened with you and may be able to put your mind at ease or work out other strategies for dealing with the situation.

## How do you take PEP?

PEP can be a combination of 2 – 3 different kinds of anti-HIV medication that you need to take twice a day at set times for 4 weeks. If you miss a dose or take it late, it can mean the medication doesn't work as well.

### **Does PEP have any side-effects?**

The drugs are very strong and can cause side-effects that may include nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea and headaches.

These side-effects may last the entire 4 weeks you're on the medications although not everyone experiences side-effects.

### **“PEP needs to be taken within 72 hours of the risk event.”**

#### **Do you need to continue seeing your doctor after you've finished taking PEP?**

You will need to keep going to your doctor or sexual health service after you finish taking PEP for follow-up blood tests. They'll ask you to go for testing at

- 6 weeks
- 3 months
- 6 months

#### **Where you go to get PEP**

You can only get PEP from a doctor who is trained in anti-HIV medications, a sexual health service or accident and emergency (A&E) service at a hospital. Depending on where you go to get PEP there are certain things you need to be aware of.

**Sexual health services**—You need to call ahead if possible and let them know that you need PEP.

Sometimes they may not have a doctor there for you to talk to, or they may not have enough appointments in the day to see you. If this happens, they will refer you to an A&E in a hospital.

If they refer you to an A&E, it's important to ask them if they can call ahead to let them know you are coming and to explain what you need.

If you have any problems in A&E (they may not know what you're talking about or leave you waiting when you should be seen immediately), get them to call the sexual health service so that they can advocate on your behalf to make it an easier process for you.

**Accident and emergency**—The main issue with going to an A&E is that the staff you see there may not know what PEP is.

If you're able to, print off this fact sheet, take along the green PEP brochure “PEP: Do You Think You've Been Exposed to HIV?”, get the sexual health service to call ahead for you or ask us at Respect Inc to call ahead for you.

If it's the weekend and you can't do any of these things, write down on a piece of paper exactly what you need so you can clearly explain it to the A&E: “I need prophylactic HIV anti-retroviral medication or Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) because I've had an incident where I may have been exposed to HIV. I need to take the medication as soon as possible to ensure it works as well as it can and the guidelines say I need to be seen ASAP”.

If they still don't know what it is, ask them to Google it!

### **“Your PEP provider will help you decide if you should take it” “Don't forget to get your follow-up blood tests done.”**

**Doctors**—Not all doctors are able to prescribe PEP, so you need to see one who can.

Doctors who are trained to give PEP are generally located in sexual health services or A&Es, or are GPs who work a lot with HIVpositive, gay, lesbian and transgender communities.

You can Google ‘doctors’ and ask them on the phone if they have a doctor who is able to prescribe PEP.

#### **What happens when you go for an appointment to pick up PEP?**

If you go to a sexual health service or A&E, when you get there let them know you are there for PEP and need to be seen ASAP. The reception staff may ask you how long it has been since you had the incident so that they can let the nurses know.

1. You'll see a nurse who will triage you and ask questions to work out what the risk factors are and if you're in the right window period to take PEP. The nurse will work with you on strategies for dealing with the situation whether you take PEP or not.
2. The nurse will speak to a doctor who is trained in anti-HIV medications and discuss everything you have said. The doctor will then decide whether to prescribe it or not.
3. If you're going to be prescribed PEP you'll be given pre-test counselling, which is where a nurse or psychologist will talk with you about what will happen if your tests come back positive or negative for HIV, how HIV is transmitted, and not transmitted, and what exactly is involved in taking PEP.
4. You'll be given a blood test to establish a baseline of what's happening with your blood, because this will change when you begin taking PEP and they need to measure what's going on in your blood to see how you're going.
5. You'll be given a 3 day starter pack of medication for PEP treatment and they'll explain how and when to take it and possible side-effects. Follow-up appointments will also be made for you to come in for further blood tests. You will be asked to return in 3 days to assess how you are coping and to collect the 30 day supply of medications.
6. The 3 day starter pack is generally free. The medications given to people requiring PEP are very expensive and while federal government subsidises the greater proportion of the cost you will be required to pay a co-payment for the months supply of PEP. Depending on your risk, you may be prescribed 2 or 3 different HIV drugs.

**“PEP needs to be taken at the same time everyday.”**

### **Places that prescribe PEP**

Remember to call ahead first and make an appointment if possible! Sexual health services and doctors' surgeries may have limited opening hours and not be open on weekends.

If it's a weekend or late at night and you can't access or call one of these services, you'll have to go to an A&E centre (hospital).

If you do go to an A&E centre, they will transfer your files to the sexual health centre or GP of your choice for follow-up appointments.

### **Places to go if you need a sexual health check or want to discuss medical issues further Sexual health & HIV clinics**

AIDS Medical Unit Brisbane  
07 3837 5622 (existing client or your partners is, only)

Bamaga Sexual Health Clinic  
07 4090 4219

Brisbane Sexual Health Clinic  
07 3837 5611

Bundaberg Health Clinic (Q Clinic)  
07 4150 2754

Cairns Sexual Health Clinic (The Dolls House)  
07 4050 6205

Cape York Health Service District Program  
07 4082 3651

Gold Coast Sexual Health Service (Miami)  
07 5576 9033

Ipswich Sexual Health Service (S.H.op101)  
07 3817 2428

Mackay Sexual Health and Sexual Assault Service  
07 4968 3919

Mt Isa Sexual Health Services  
07 4744 4805

Palm Island Sexual Health Service  
07 4752 5100

Redcliffe/Caboolture Sexual Health and HIV Service  
07 3897 6300

Rockhampton Sexual Health and HIV Service  
07 4920 5555

Sunshine Coast – Wide Bay Sexual Health & HIV Service  
07 5470 5244

Thursday Island – Men’s and Women’s Health  
07 4069 0413  
Toowoomba (Kobi House)  
07 4616 6446  
Townsville Sexual Health Unit  
07 4778 9600  
Weipa Sexual Health Program  
07 4090 6206  
Wolloongabba Princess Alexandra Sexual Health  
(PASH or PA)  
07 3240 5881

**Gay, lesbian and transgender friendly doctors**

Central Brunswick Street Medical Centre  
(Brisbane)  
07 3852 2733  
Gladstone Road Medical Centre (Brisbane)  
07 3844 9599  
Stonewall Medical Centre (Brisbane)  
07 3857 1222

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**Disclaimer:**

All material in this fact sheet is provided for your information only and may not be construed as legal, medical or health advice or instruction.

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