

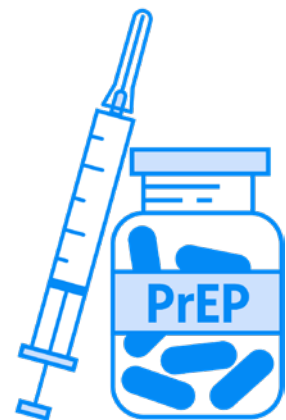
Intro to Long-Acting PrEP: A Brief Primer

The Future of PrEP is Now is a new research project that aims to prepare Canada for the arrival of “long-acting” PrEP by better understanding community needs and preferences for accessing and taking PrEP. This primer provides a brief introduction to PrEP, including current and future options for taking PrEP, a review of key barriers to PrEP access, and how “long-acting” PrEP may benefit people interested in taking PrEP.



What is PrEP?

- PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is an HIV-prevention strategy that involves HIV negative people taking anti-HIV medication starting before (and continuing after) they are or may be exposed to the virus.
- When taken as prescribed, it is effective at preventing HIV transmission through sex or sharing needles to inject drugs.
- People taking PrEP should undergo regular, 3-monthly laboratory testing for HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and monitoring, and follow-up with their prescriber.



Current PrEP Options: Oral PrEP

- In Canada, PrEP is currently only available in pill form.
- There are two products available: Truvada™ (also available in generic form) and Descovy™.
- Both forms of oral PrEP can be dosed daily. For gay, bi, and queer men, oral PrEP can also be used “on demand”.
- This means taking two pills 2-24 hours before having sex, then one pill the day after, and another pill the day after that (also called “2-1-1” dosing).
- Both forms of oral PrEP are very well tolerated, although sometimes people feel a bit of upset stomach for the first few days of taking the pills.
- PrEP can also affect kidney function, which should be monitored with regular blood-work, and bone density, which should be discussed with the prescribing clinician.

Future PrEP Options: Long-Acting PrEP

- New “long-acting” options for taking PrEP are being evaluated in clinical trials, including injections, implants and new types of oral pills.
- The closest option on the horizon is long-acting injectable cabotegravir (CAB-LA) - an injection every two months. It is already being used as HIV treatment but as of early 2022, is not yet approved in Canada for use as PrEP.
- Emerging data from these studies show that this new form of PrEP is effective at preventing HIV transmission.

“There have been some amazing clinical trial results that have been put forward showing us that the use of long acting injectable medications as infrequently as every 8 weeks or 2 months, also is effective, perhaps even more effective than daily oral PrEP.”

*- Dr. Darrell Tan, St. Michael's Hospital,
infectious diseases physician and clinician-scientist*

Barriers to PrEP

Even though PrEP is highly effective at preventing HIV transmission, access remains limited for many people who could benefit from it. Many of these barriers are systemic in nature and are rooted in racism, colonization, homophobia, and transphobia. Below is a list of some of the commonly reported barriers to accessing or taking oral PrEP.



Adherence

Taking a pill every day or “on demand” doesn’t work for everyone. Some people find it difficult to take pills regularly or on a specific schedule for a variety of reasons.



Cost or lack of coverage

Depending on where we live and our access to health insurance, the cost of PrEP may be a significant barrier. Many people cannot afford the cost of deductibles or co-pays, if PrEP is not covered 100%.



Lack of PrEP awareness or knowledge

PrEP marketing and promotion has often centred white cisgender gay men, with less focus on building awareness among non-white and gender nonconforming people. For example, Indigenous peoples have largely been left out of PrEP promotion, despite PrEP being free for Indigenous people covered by the Federal Non-Insured Health Benefits program since 2016.

“Within Two-Spirit, queer and trans Indigenous communities, about 77 percent of the people know about PrEP, but less than 8 percent of people are actually on PrEP.”

[Data from CBRC’s Sex Now Survey]

*- Jessy Dame, sexual health nurse and
CBRC Two-Spirit Program Manager*



Lack of sensitivity or knowledge among healthcare providers

Getting onto PrEP can be difficult without access to knowledgeable and sensitive healthcare providers who can provide an open and safe space to talk about sex and HIV prevention options. People who distrust or fear the healthcare system due to past negative experiences or their status as a newcomer may face added challenges in finding a healthcare provider that they trust.



Geographic distribution of PrEP services

People living outside urban areas often face greater barriers, as the need to travel and the lack of clinic options can make it difficult to find a PrEP provider. In addition, those without a fixed mailing address have a harder time accessing medical services.



Stigma

Some people may be concerned about being judged or stigmatized for taking PrEP, which can affect their decision to go on PrEP. Taking oral PrEP daily or regularly may be an added concern for people who are worried about being “outed” as a PrEP user, or their sexual identity or practices.

“...the awareness needs to be raised among people that folks trust. That might include barbers, or aunties, or DJs or pastors.”

*- Dr. LaRon Nelson, Affiliate Scientist at St. Michael’s Hospital,
sexual health nurse and family nurse practitioner*

Looking Ahead to Long-Acting PrEP

While other barriers may emerge for "long-acting" PrEP, including fear or dislike of needles, it may be an important way to address some of the barriers to oral PrEP. As with oral PrEP, regular follow-up with a healthcare provider will still be required for long-acting PrEP users for HIV/STI testing and related health monitoring.

- A key benefit with long-acting PrEP is that daily or on-demand use of pills is no longer required, which may address some adherence barriers to oral PrEP. Long-acting PrEP options provide users with the full protection associated with PrEP, without having to take a pill everyday.
- With long-acting options such as an injection every 2-6 months, people who are concerned about being judged or stigmatized for PrEP use may have more discreet options for taking PrEP.

Long-acting PrEP may offer significant benefits for both current and potential PrEP users, but there are still some unanswered questions, including how this option works for different people. The Future of PrEP is Now research project is exploring many of these questions as we prepare for the approval of long-acting PrEP in Canada.

For more information, watch part one of our webinar series, ["PrEP: Where Are We Now?"](#) and check out [CATIE's](#) PrEP resources.

