

# PEPSE: *A patient's guide*



## What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV prevents the immune system from working properly. Although treatment is available for someone with HIV, they will have the virus for the rest of their life.

## What is PEPSE?

PEPSE stands for Post-Exposure Prophylaxis following Sexual Exposure.

It is a short course of HIV treatment, given to people who may have been exposed to HIV, in order to reduce the risk of them becoming HIV positive.

The most common reason for giving PEPSE is that someone has had unprotected vaginal or anal sex (without a condom or where the condom failed) with someone who is known to be HIV positive or is thought likely to be HIV positive.

**PEPSE needs to be taken as soon as possible after unsafe sex or a condom breaking and no later than 72 hours afterwards.**

## Does PEPSE work?

Research suggests that PEPSE makes infection with HIV less likely. However, PEPSE doesn't work every time – some people who take it still become HIV positive. It can fail because some anti-HIV drugs don't work against some strains of HIV. Also, if it's not taken properly or soon enough it is more likely to fail.

## What should I do if I think I need PEPSE?

PEPSE needs to be taken as soon as possible and within 72 hours. To access PEPSE you will need to go to your nearest Accident & Emergency department or sexual health clinic (Genitourinary medicine). The doctor who sees you will make a decision about whether you need to take PEPSE. If PEPSE is recommended by the doctor you will need an HIV test to make sure you are not already positive. You will then have blood tests to check your liver and kidney function. If you are given PEPSE you will need to have regular check ups.

The final checks for HIV will be done after 3 and 6 months.

## What is the treatment?

A combination of drugs will be prescribed if the doctor feels there has been a significant risk of exposure to HIV. These are drugs that work against HIV and are more effective if taken in combination. They need to be taken every day for 4 weeks. The medicine must be taken regularly and the course completed.

## Are there any side-effects?

HIV treatment can cause side-effects and these tend to be worse when treatment is first started. The most common side-effects are headaches, nausea, diarrhoea and tiredness, although these usually wear off after a week. The nausea and diarrhoea can be treated with other medication.

# Things to remember about PEPSE

- PEPSE might stop someone getting infected with HIV
- It's not guaranteed to work
- It must be started as soon as possible after unsafe sex or a condom breaking, and within 72 hours
- PEPSE is free of charge
- It means taking drugs for 4-weeks
- Side effects are common but can be managed with other medicines
- Not everyone wanting PEPSE will get it – doctors will decide who needs it

**PEPSE is not a cure for HIV and is not guaranteed to prevent HIV from taking hold once the virus has entered the body. Using condoms during sex remains the most efficient way of staying safe from HIV.**

# Useful Contacts

If you would like more information about PEPSE, HIV or need further support, please see the contacts below:

## **Churchill Hospital:**

Health Advisers 01865 231231 (option 3)

## **Other sources of support:**

Terence Higgins Trust Helpline 0845 1221 200

Website: [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)

NAM website: [www.aidsmap.com](http://www.aidsmap.com)

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language,  
large print, Braille or audio version,  
please call **01865 221473** or  
email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

Jen Fearnley, Sexual Health Adviser  
Version 1, August 2010  
Review, August 2013  
Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust  
Oxford OX3 9DU  
[www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/patientinformation](http://www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/patientinformation)