



ESTHER BUSH

HIV and PrEP

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on HIV and PrEP. The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Erricka Hager, health advocate, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO, spoke about this topic.

EH: Good morning, Ms. Bush. Our "Take Charge" readers may know that HIV and AIDS are previous topics that we have learned about. However, PrEP information may be new. I'm curious to hear your thoughts about this month's topic. Have you ever heard of PrEP?

EB: That's a great question, Erricka. Unfortunately, my knowledge about PrEP is limited. I do understand how important this daily pill is in the fight against HIV, and I'm glad we're taking the time to discuss this today. I'm saddened every time I hear that close to half of all new HIV cases in the United States are among African Americans.

EH: I absolutely agree, Ms. Bush. The number of HIV-infected African Americans is staggering. It tells me that we need to continue working hard to raise awareness about the disease and to constantly encourage HIV testing and promote prevention. It's important to educate the communities we serve about the improvements to HIV medication. These breakthroughs are helping people who are HIV-positive lead long lives. In fact, I've heard doctors speak of HIV as a chronic disease, similar to how we think about long-term treatment of diabetes and heart disease. Preventing new infections in the first place is essential. Pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, is a daily pill that is a preventive way for people who do not have HIV but who are at substantial risk of getting it to prevent HIV infection. PrEP is a powerful HIV prevention tool and has been shown to reduce the risk of HIV infection in people who are at high risk by up to 92 percent. That's amazing! It can also be combined with condoms and other prevention methods for even greater protection than when used alone.

EB: Wow! Thank you, Erricka, for all this information. I agree that prevention is essential and a critical issue to discuss. Which organizations offer prevention methods such as this for African American populations in Pittsburgh and the surrounding counties? We need to be sure our communities have access to these resources and knowledge about where to find help.

EH: That's a great question, Ms. Bush. A few of the organizations we partner with are listed on this page. Staff members at these organizations care so much about preventing new infections, and they do not judge. They will work with people to find the best doctors and ways to access these interventions. Readers can also visit me here at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Health Education Office. I can also provide links between services, including HIV testing and counseling. If we all do our part and work together to reduce the stigma of this disease, we should see a reduction in the number of new cases among African Americans.

EB: Thank you for having this chat with me, Erricka. We've provided readers with some great information and ways they can take charge of their health today. I look forward to chatting with you next month as we discuss the importance of sleep across the lifespan and its effect on our overall health—no matter how old we are.

Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.

AIDS Free Pittsburgh breaking down barriers to HIV/AIDS care and treatment

Over the years, treatment for people who are HIV positive has gotten better. Though there is still no cure for HIV, people can better control how the infection affects their bodies by using drugs that suppress the virus. But even with advances in medications, HIV prevention is still a high priority for public health advocates and health care providers.

In 2016, the Pennsylvania Department of Health documented 127 new HIV cases, and an estimated 2,910 people lived with HIV in Allegheny County. Allegheny County has the second-highest number of new

HIV cases and people living with HIV in Pennsylvania. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2016 data show that Blacks/African Americans accounted for 44 percent of HIV diagnoses, though they comprise only 12 percent of the population of the United States.

One organization dedicated to HIV/AIDS care and prevention in Allegheny County is AIDS Free Pittsburgh. The AIDS Free Pittsburgh initiative began on December 1, 2015, as a partnership between UPMC and Allegheny Health Network. AIDS Free Pittsburgh does not provide services. It raises awareness about HIV/

AIDS and collaborates with the many partners in the region that provide services to people with HIV/AIDS or to high-risk negative communities.

According to Sue Steele, project coordinator with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, the fiscal agent for AIDS Free Pittsburgh, the organization's mission is to have no AIDS diagnoses in Allegheny County and to reduce the rate of new HIV infections by 75 percent by 2020. Ms. Steele says AIDS Free Pittsburgh hopes to accomplish this mission through three goals:

1. Normalizing HIV testing—make HIV/AIDS screening routine in medical settings

AIDS Free Pittsburgh states that, in 2015-16, only 39 percent of adults in Allegheny County reported having ever been tested for HIV. Early HIV detection and treatment dramatically reduce the transmission of new cases. (Readers can visit http://aidsfreepittsburgh.org/hiv_testing.php to find a list of free HIV testing locations.)

2. Increasing access to PrEP—establish ways to prevent HIV transmission, including education about PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis)

PrEP is a daily pill that can help lower chances of getting infected with HIV or stop the infection from spreading. CDC reports that taking PrEP as prescribed reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by more than 90 percent.

"Truvada, also known as PrEP, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2012 and is quite effective," says Ken S. Ho, MD, MPH, assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. (Dr. Ho also conducts studies about PrEP and other HIV-prevention tools. Information about two such studies can be found elsewhere on the page.) "People at high risk who should at least have PrEP offered to them are men who have sex with men and transgender women, heterosexual men and women and injection-drug users. We need to do better with targeting peo-



KEN S. HO, MD, MPH

ple who are at high risk."

However, a disparity exists in who benefits from PrEP. CDC data suggests that PrEP is not reaching most Americans who could benefit, especially people of color. Forty-four percent of people who could potentially benefit from PrEP for HIV prevention are African American, but only 1 percent of those were actually prescribed PrEP in 2015.

"A lot of people are on PrEP, but they're mostly white men with insurance," says Dr. Ho. "But we look at where new HIV infections are coming from—youths and men of color who have sex with men. These are not the groups who are usually on PrEP. So now we're looking at how best to target the groups at high risk for HIV and make PrEP available to them."

PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) is 28 days of HIV medication that can be taken to protect against infection. People have to start taking the medicine within 72 hours (about three days) after a suspected or known exposure to HIV. (Readers can visit www.preppgh.com to find an online directory of local PrEP and PEP providers.)

3. Improving linkage to care—helping people who are diagnosed with HIV get quick access to high-quality health care

AIDS Free Pittsburgh can be a first step for people who are HIV positive or at high risk for HIV exposure. The organization and its partners meet regularly to coordinate services and find the best way to find help for people living with HIV. The Ryan White HIV/AIDS program provides a comprehensive system of care that includes primary medical care and essential support services for people living with HIV who are uninsured or underinsured. Most of all, Ms. Steele wants people to know that there are safe places for people to go.

"There's no reason why anyone who is HIV positive shouldn't get treatment at a place where they feel comfortable," she says. "If people are trying to prevent or treat HIV, there are services, regardless of the situation. AIDS Free Pittsburgh can help break down barriers to care or treatment for any individual."

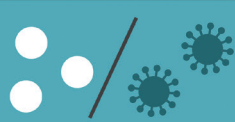
ARE YOU READY FOR PrEP?

PrEP 101

PrEP Basics

PrEP stands for **Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis**

The word "prophylaxis" means to prevent or control the spread of an infection or disease



PrEP can help prevent you from getting HIV if you are exposed to the virus

PrEP is an HIV prevention option that works by taking **one pill every day**

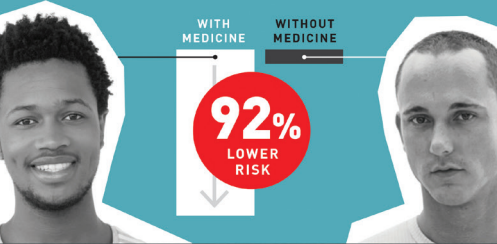


How Does It Work?



Some of the same medicines prescribed for the treatment of HIV can also be prescribed for its prevention

In several studies of PrEP, the risk of getting HIV infection was much lower — up to 92% lower — for those who took the medicines consistently than for those who didn't take the pill



When taken every day, PrEP can provide a high level of protection against HIV, and is **even more effective when it is combined with condoms and other prevention tools**

People who use PrEP must take the medicine **every day** and return to their health care provider every 3 months for follow-up and prescription refills

SIDE EFFECTS

Some people in clinical studies of PrEP had early side effects such as an upset stomach or loss of appetite, but these were mild and usually went away in the first month. Some people also had a mild headache. No serious side effects were observed. You should tell your health care provider if these or other symptoms become severe or do not go away.

Start Talking. Stop HIV.



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Pitt EpiPrEP Pilot Study volunteers needed

Are you a HIV-negative man who has sex with other men? Are you planning on going away on vacation soon? If so, you may be eligible to participate in a study to help investigators test the feasibility and acceptability of short-term PrEP. PrEP is taking medications typically used to treat HIV to help prevent HIV. Compensation provided.

Microbicide Study for HIV Prevention

Healthy, HIV-negative men or transgender women are needed for a study that is looking at a microbicide gel, called dapivirine, to see how this product is processed within the body when applied rectally. Participants must have had at least one experience of receptive anal sex in the past



PrEP IS A NEW HIV PREVENTION METHOD IN WHICH PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE HIV INFECTION TAKE A PILL DAILY TO REDUCE THEIR RISK OF BECOMING INFECTED.

year. Study participation includes six to seven visits to Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC across two months. Compensation is provided.

If interested in either study, contact Sherri J. Karas, MEd, at 412-383-1313 or sjk91@pitt.edu.



Project Silk

A community space for LGBTQ Youth of Color

What is Project Silk?

Project Silk provides a safe, healthy, supportive community environment for LGBT youth of color to grow, celebrate and express themselves. With service providers and community partners, we advocate for our youths to determine the meaning and direction of their own lives.

We invite you to come and chill, relax, get involved, ask questions, seek and receive services and lend your voice!

What Types of Services are offered?

- Free and confidential HIV/STI testing
- Linking people to medical care, housing, mental health counseling, education and job readiness assistance, sexual

health education, hormone treatment, legal services, supplemental food, financial literacy, life skills and healthy relationship development

- Providing space for artistic expression
- Support for young men and transgender women of color in the pursuit of their authentic selves

How Can I Visit?

Project Silk is located at 304 Wood Street, mezzanine level, Pittsburgh, PA 15222 and open Monday through Thursday from 1-8p.m. Like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ProjectSilk) to view our calendar for more details about scheduled services and programming.

