



SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS, HIV/AIDS

## PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PREP) FOR THE PREVENTION OF HIV, TOWARDS ZERO NEW INFECTIONS BY 2030

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According to the WHO, 39 million people have died of HIV since the beginning of the epidemic. Moreover, of the 36.9 million people living with HIV today, just over 940,000 died in 2017, a drop of 40 percent from 2013. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) has changed the ugly face of HIV from a deadly disease into a chronic condition with a normal life expectancy for those who have good health access.

In the past years a new indication for ART has been implemented in the form of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). With one tablet a day and very little side effects, people at increased risk to get infected can protect themselves against HIV. PrEP has proven to be extremely effective. For this reason, since 2015 WHO recommends PrEP as an additional prevention choice for people at substantial risk for HIV infection as part of combination prevention approaches.

Past introductions of biomedical interventions to prevent unwanted outcomes of sexual contact, such as STI and unwanted pregnancy have spurred debate and controversy. Penicillin for the cure of syphilis was feared for its effect on promiscuous behavior and rise in gonorrhoea incidence. It took the Japanese government until 1999 to allow the sale of oral contraceptives for the fear it might ignite the HIV epidemic. The recent introduction of the HPV vaccine against cervical cancer was condemned by the Catholic church for its alleged immoral effect on young girls. None of the supposed unwanted effects of these highly effective interventions on sexual behavior has proven right.

PrEP is now received with the same moralistic attitude. Especially the use of PrEP by Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) is feared to unleash risky sexual behavior (also known as risk compensation). So far, the data do not prove a rise in STI among MSM who use PrEP.

Let us not lose time in emotional and non-rational discussions that inevitably will delay the roll out of an extremely effective intervention that can prevent new HIV infections. PrEP can help us to reach the ambitious, yet realistic goal to have zero new infections by 2030. If we fail to take every effort, we'll lose this opportunity and prolong the suffering and deaths that HIV has caused so far already.

