

## **AIDS COMMUNITY CARE MONTREAL'S PrEP POSITION STATEMENT**

### **WHAT IS PREP?**

PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) is a method of reducing HIV transmission that involves HIV-negative people preventatively taking Truvada, an antiretroviral medication normally used to treat HIV. When taken as directed, PrEP has proven to be a beneficial prevention tool for reducing HIV transmission rates. However, its makers recommend that PrEP be combined with risk reduction counseling, consistent and correct use of condoms, and regular HIV testing. An individual taking PrEP needs to be aware if they've contracted HIV because they will require more than Truvada for adequate treatment or the virus could quickly adapt and become resistant to medication. PrEP does not prevent the transmission of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the presence of an STI could decrease the effectiveness of PrEP so it is important to get tested regularly and follow treatments as prescribed.

### **WHY DO WE FEEL THE NEED TO TAKE POSITION ON THIS ISSUE NOW?**

Truvada is currently not approved as PrEP in Canada but an application has been submitted to Health Canada and it is currently prescribed off-label by certain physicians. ACCM feels that it is important to inform our communities that PrEP is an option for HIV prevention. We wish to help shape public discourse, as well as encourage critical reflection so that we can contribute to our communities' preparedness and help people make informed decisions. We feel that discourse around PrEP should seek to unpack the issues at play rather than simply polarize opinions into opposing camps of supporters and detractors. We believe that there are ways to advocate for PrEP while also avoiding unquestioned endorsement without analysis around the various implications the intervention has for public health. By releasing this document, we seek to position ourselves on some of the most crucial arguments and encourage our community to think through these issues and engage in a public conversation that will ultimately build our community preparedness and help shape our response to PrEP.

### **WHAT IS OUR POSITION?**

#### **ON ACCESS TO PrEP**

- We affirm a person's right to self-determination over their health and likewise believe that under no circumstances should anyone be pressured or forced into using PrEP nor dissuaded from taking it if they feel it is the right decision for them.
- While we support the continued and increased availability of PrEP for men who have sex with men (MSM), we believe PrEP should be made more accessible to all people at risk of HIV transmission.
- A PrEP prescription currently costs between \$900 and \$980 per month<sup>1</sup> in Quebec and although it can be accessed through RAMQ or a private drug plan for around \$85 a month, this cost may still be prohibitively expensive for many.
- Acquiring a prescription for PrEP will likely require a consultation with a physician accustomed to dealing with HIV issues and we are concerned that this may limit PrEP accessibility for people living outside of large urban centres or for people who do not have a physician who is adequately informed about PrEP.

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<sup>1</sup> At time of publishing (November 2015)

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- We acknowledge that people with prescriptions for Truvada who are in difficult financial situations may sell their medication as PrEP, leaving them without adequate HIV treatment
- We are also concerned that interprovincial bureaucracy around access to medication could cause poor adherence rates for visitors and temporary residents of Quebec, and we are troubled by the fact that PrEP is not being made available to those who do not have access to health insurance and/or legal citizenship but who are at risk for HIV transmission.

#### ON PrEP'S IMPACT ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

- While studies have shown that PrEP does not encourage riskier behaviour, we are interested to see if the intervention will affect condom use. Results stating otherwise were developed within the context of clinical trials where researchers offered psychosocial support, and it is unclear what part of our public health system would fulfill this role, as well as help maintain adherence to PrEP regimens.
- In addition to the protection afforded by PrEP, research has shown significant decreases in the risk of HIV transmission when an HIV positive partner's viral load is undetectable. We encourage public dialogue about how these developments will affect condom use, especially amongst MSM who have traditionally shown much higher use of condoms compared to the general population<sup>2</sup>.
- We recognize that some people have difficulty or choose not to consistently use condoms for a variety of reasons and we support the development of alternative prevention strategies, while acknowledging that PrEP is not being recommended as an alternative to condom use.

#### ON PrEP'S IMPLICATIONS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

- PrEP presents new opportunities for persons living with HIV to transfer their experiential knowledge of anti-retroviral regimen adherence and to continue taking leadership roles in HIV prevention. We hope that space is made for people living with HIV to participate in the conversation around PrEP and guide HIV-negative people who are either currently taking, or considering taking, anti-retrovirals as prevention.
- We do not wish for the excitement around PrEP to eclipse the importance of continuing to look for a cure, confronting HIV stigma and increasing treatment access for those in our society who currently do not have access to HIV medications.
- We are troubled by the fact that PrEP has been developed as a health-based intervention for HIV-negative people who have difficulty consistently using condoms while our current justice system chooses to criminalize HIV-positive people for facing the same difficulties.

#### WHAT DO WE WANT TO SEE HAPPEN AROUND THESE ISSUES?

##### REDUCED COSTS

- We call on pharmaceutical companies to reduce the cost of PrEP and all HIV treatment medication so that access to treatment can become more affordable. We urge governments to ensure that these much-needed medications and treatments will be accessible to the populations that need them.

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<sup>2</sup> ARGUS 2008-2009: A survey on HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections (STI) as well as associated risk behaviours among Quebec men who have sex with men (MSM). Direction de santé publique de l'Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal, Institut national de santé publique du Québec and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011



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## RESEARCH

- We advocate for further research into PrEP's implications and challenges for various communities and populations such as sex workers, women, intravenous drug users, indigenous communities, migrant populations, people of colour, people living in poverty and transgender, as well as incarcerated, individuals.
- Information about PrEP must be disseminated more broadly so that all health practitioners are aware of PrEP and are willing and informed enough to prescribe it. There need to be clear and consistent guidelines so that prescriptions are not withheld subjectively. Community-based organizations and other stakeholders should be actively involved in shaping those guidelines.
- We support research underway to fully understand PrEP's potential in HIV prevention, such as the development of different treatment regimens that require less frequent dosages and can be taken when needed (PrEP on-demand).
- We encourage continued clinical research into the long-term effects of PrEP on the human body but also call for research on how PrEP will influence long-term behavioural norms.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

- Many MSM feel they are being shamed for using PrEP and we oppose such stigmatization of an individual's sexual health decisions. We encourage sex-positive and non-judgmental responses towards PrEP, its users and their behaviours.
- We are hopeful that the use of PrEP can help break down anxiety for serodiscordant sexual partners, and encourage open-mindedness around engaging in sexual activity regardless of a partner's serostatus.
- We advocate for treating HIV-positive people who are facing difficulties using condoms with the same health-based, humane, approach we are treating HIV-negative people with the development of PrEP. Such approaches include addressing HIV-related stigma and offering programs for people living with HIV that can help them cope with disclosure issues.
- We believe that the same enthusiasm around medicalized interventions should also be directed towards taking care of each other as a community in addition to looking after our own personal well-being

If you are looking to access PrEP, you can schedule an appointment at any of the following clinics:

### **Clinic L'Actuel**

<http://cliniquelactuel.com/>

Address : 1001, boul. de Maisonneuve Est, bureau 1130, Montréal

Telephone : 514-524-1001.

### **Clinic OPUS**

<http://cliniqueopus.com/>

Address : 1470 Peel, Tower A, 8th floor, Suite 850, Montréal,

Telephone : 514-787-6787

### **Clinic Quartier Latin**

<http://cliniquequartierlatin.com/>

Address : 905, boul. René Lévesque Est, Montréal.

Telephone : 514-285-5500.



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This document is not intended as an exhaustive educational resource on PrEP. For more information, consult:

<http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidelines/qa-prep-msm/en/>

[http://www.cdnaids.ca/files.nsf/pages/cas-prep-kit-final/\\$file/CAS-PrEP-Kit-Final.pdf](http://www.cdnaids.ca/files.nsf/pages/cas-prep-kit-final/$file/CAS-PrEP-Kit-Final.pdf)

<http://www.hivnow.ca/prep-1/>

<https://start.truvada.com/>

<http://myprepexperience.blogspot.ca/>