

# Patient Information Sheet – *Acute HIV Infection*

## Information about Acute HIV Infection and PrEP

### What is acute HIV Infection?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. This is the virus that causes AIDS.

Acute HIV infection is a name for the earliest stage of HIV infection, when you first get infected with the HIV virus. It is sometimes also called primary HIV infection. Many people with acute HIV infection have the following:

- A fever
- A tired feeling
- Swollen lymph nodes (also called lymph glands)
- Swollen tonsils (also called tonsillitis)
- A sore throat
- Joint and muscle aches
- Diarrhea
- A rash

These signs and symptoms of acute HIV infection can begin a few days after you are exposed to HIV and usually last for about 14 days. They could last for just a few days, or they could last for several months.

You might not realize your illness is acute HIV infection. For one thing, you may not have known that the person you had sex with had HIV infection. And the signs and symptoms of HIV infection may feel just like other common virus infections like flu, a cold, sore throat, or mononucleosis (mono).

### What tests can show that I have acute HIV infection?

When HIV enters your body, it moves inside white blood cells called CD4 lymphocytes. HIV takes over the CD4 cells and makes billions of copies of the virus each day. The virus spread through your body.

Your body tries to defend itself against HIV by making antibodies (these antibodies try to block the virus from spreading in your body). Most HIV tests check to see if antibodies against HIV are in your blood. But it takes a few weeks before your body makes enough antibodies for the usual HIV tests to see them.

However, when you have acute HIV infection, you have a high amount of the HIV virus in your blood. Special tests can measure the amount of HIV in your blood. At the time you have acute HIV infection, you probably won't have enough HIV antibodies in your blood to measure, but you will have enough virus to measure. So if the blood tests do not find any antibody but do see the virus, your doctor will know that you're feeling sick because you have acute HIV infection.

### How does it help to find out I have HIV at an early stage?

First, PrEP is used to help lower your chances of getting HIV infection. If you already have acute HIV infection you should not take PrEP.

Second, while PrEP helps protect people, especially when they take their doses every day, it is still possible to get HIV infection. So if you are taking PrEP and have the signs and symptoms mentioned above, it is important to see your doctor to be checked. If you have some other infection, like the flu, you should continue your PrEP medicines but if it is discovered that you have acute HIV infection, you should stop taking PrEP as soon as your tests show that you have HIV infection.

Third, people who take PrEP for more than a couple of weeks while they have HIV infection can easily develop virus that can't be treated with those same drugs (resistant virus). So finding out quickly that you have HIV infection and stopping PrEP can protect your long term health and keep your treatment options open.

And fourth, when people have lots of virus in their body during acute HIV infection, they are more likely to pass the virus on to people they have sex with, especially since they may not know yet that they have gotten infected. For example, if your last HIV test result was negative and your partner also had a recent negative HIV test result, you might choose to have sex without a condom just at the time when it's very likely you would pass the virus on. So the sooner you know you have become infected, the more careful you can be to protect others from getting HIV infection.

## **How is HIV treated?**

People who have HIV infection are treated with combinations of 3 or more medicines that fight HIV. Some doctors start people on treatment medications as soon as they become infected; other doctors wait for a while because the greatest benefits to a person's health are seen after they have been infected a while. Early treatment also reduces the chances that a person with HIV infection will pass the virus on to their sex partners.

## **What do I do if I suspect I might have acute HIV infection?**

First, contact your doctor's office and arrange to be examined and have the right blood tests.

Second, discuss with your doctor whether to stop your PrEP medications or continue them until your test results are back.

Third, be especially careful to use condoms and take other safer sex measures to protect your partner(s).