

# WHAT IS POST-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS?

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) means taking antiretroviral medications as soon as possible after exposure to HIV, so that the exposure will not result in HIV infection. These medications are only available with a prescription.

PEP is a four-week program of two or three antiretroviral medications, several times a day. The medications have side effects that can make it difficult to finish the program. PEP is not 100% effective; it cannot guarantee that exposure to HIV will not become a case of HIV infection.

Since 1996, PEP has been used as an emergency procedure for healthcare workers who accidentally become exposed to HIV via needlesticks. PEP can reduce the rate of seroconversion by 79%. PEP medication must be initiated a few hours after exposure. The following are considered serious exposures:

- Exposure to a large amount of blood

- Blood came in contact with cuts or open sores on the skin
- Blood was visible on a needle that stuck someone

Victims of sexual assault in which the perpetrator has unknown HIV status are also candidates for PEP treatment.

In recent years, community activists and researchers have asked for PEP to be used for other types of exposures. PEP can be taken after any HIV exposure, including accidental sexual exposure, but some people believe that making PEP widely available will encourage unsafe behavior if people see it as a form of contraception.

Other reasons that PEP has not been offered to treat non-occupational exposure are costs (PEP is between \$800 - \$1000), lack of research (no one has proven it even works!), and the lack of knowledge of PEP by healthcare providers.



## **Nebraska AIDS Education and Training Center**

*A collaboration of University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska AIDS Project*

For more information on transmission, you may call the Nebraska AIDS Hotline at 1-800-782-AIDS or Nebraska AIDS Project at 402-552-9260. HIV/AIDS Basic Trainings or in-services on specific topics are available through the Nebraska AIDS Education and Training Center.