



# Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) Protocol

Comprehensive guidance for PEP counseling, follow-up testing, and continuous care through GoTo Telemed's specialized telehealth services

# Understanding Post-Exposure Prophylaxis

## What is PEP?

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is an emergency medication protocol taken after potential exposure to HIV to prevent infection. This time-sensitive treatment must begin within 72 hours of exposure and involves taking antiretroviral medications for 28 days. PEP is highly effective when started promptly, reducing HIV transmission risk by more than 80%.

Exposure situations requiring PEP consideration include occupational needle sticks, sexual assault, condom failure during intercourse with an HIV-positive partner, or sharing injection drug equipment. Each scenario carries varying transmission risks, making immediate medical consultation essential for proper assessment and treatment initiation.

The biological window for PEP effectiveness relates to HIV's replication cycle. After entering the body, HIV requires time to establish infection in immune cells. PEP medications work by blocking viral replication during this critical period, preventing the virus from gaining a permanent foothold in your system.



## Critical Time Windows

- **Optimal:** Within 2 hours of exposure
- **Recommended:** Within 24 hours
- **Maximum:** Up to 72 hours post-exposure
- **Duration:** 28-day treatment course

# Why HIV Exposure Requires Immediate Action

## Anatomical and Physiological Mechanisms

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) targets CD4+ T cells, which are essential coordinators of your immune system response. Upon entering the bloodstream or mucosal tissues, the virus binds to CD4 receptors on these white blood cells, using them as entry points. Once inside, HIV hijacks the cell's genetic machinery to replicate itself, producing thousands of viral copies that go on to infect additional immune cells.

The initial 72-hour window represents the period before widespread viral dissemination occurs. During this time, the virus remains relatively localized near the entry site and in nearby lymph nodes. This is when PEP medications are most effective—they prevent viral replication before HIV can establish reservoirs throughout your lymphatic system and immune tissues. The antiretroviral drugs in PEP block specific enzymes (reverse transcriptase, protease, and integrase) that HIV needs to reproduce and integrate into your cellular DNA.



### Viral Entry

HIV penetrates mucosal barriers or enters directly through breaks in skin, targeting CD4+ immune cells



### Cellular Integration

Virus reverse-transcribes RNA to DNA, attempting to permanently integrate into host cell genome



### Replication Phase

Infected cells produce thousands of viral copies, spreading infection to additional immune cells



### PEP Intervention

Antiretroviral medications block replication enzymes, preventing viral establishment and spread

Without intervention, HIV progressively depletes CD4+ cells over years, eventually leading to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), where the immune system becomes too compromised to fight off opportunistic infections. This is why immediate PEP initiation is critical—it stops this cascade before it begins, preserving your immune function and preventing chronic infection.

# Recognizing PEP Side Effects and HIV Symptoms

## Common PEP Medication Side Effects

Most people tolerate PEP well, but understanding potential side effects helps you prepare and persist through the full 28-day course. These symptoms typically resolve within the first two weeks as your body adjusts to the medication.

### Minor Side Effects

- Nausea and mild gastrointestinal discomfort
- Fatigue and low energy levels
- Headaches and dizziness
- Difficulty sleeping or vivid dreams
- Loss of appetite
- Mild diarrhea

These effects are generally manageable with supportive care and don't require discontinuing treatment. Taking medications with food, staying hydrated, and maintaining regular sleep schedules can significantly reduce discomfort.

### Major Side Effects (Requiring Immediate Medical Attention)

- Severe abdominal pain or persistent vomiting
- Signs of liver problems: yellowing skin/eyes, dark urine
- Severe allergic reactions: rash with fever, blistering
- Kidney dysfunction: decreased urination, swelling
- Severe depression or suicidal thoughts
- Lactic acidosis: rapid breathing, muscle pain, weakness

## Acute HIV Infection Symptoms

If HIV infection occurs despite or without PEP, acute retroviral syndrome may develop 2-4 weeks post-exposure. These symptoms resemble severe flu and indicate high viral activity.



### Early HIV Warning Signs

- High fever (101-104°F) lasting several days
- Severe sore throat and swollen lymph nodes
- Extensive skin rash (non-itchy, flat or raised)
- Profound fatigue and muscle aches
- Night sweats and chills
- Mouth ulcers and oral thrush
- Rapid weight loss

**Important:** Many people with acute HIV experience no symptoms at all. This is why follow-up testing at prescribed intervals is essential regardless of how you feel. Testing is the only way to confirm your HIV status.

# Risks of Delayed or Ignored Treatment

Delaying or avoiding PEP initiation after potential HIV exposure carries serious, life-altering consequences. Understanding these risks emphasizes why immediate action through GoTo Telemed's 24/7 services is critical for your long-term health and wellbeing.

## Permanent HIV Infection

Without PEP, HIV exposure can lead to lifelong infection requiring daily antiretroviral therapy. While modern treatments allow people with HIV to live normal lifespans, the virus becomes a permanent chronic condition requiring continuous medical management, medication adherence, and monitoring. Early intervention through PEP prevents this entirely.

## Immune System Deterioration

Untreated HIV progressively destroys CD4+ T cells over 8-10 years, eventually causing AIDS. Your body loses the ability to fight infections, making you vulnerable to opportunistic diseases like pneumonia, tuberculosis, certain cancers, and neurological disorders. This progression is preventable with timely PEP administration.

## Transmission to Others

During acute HIV infection (first few months), viral loads are extremely high, making transmission to sexual partners or needle-sharing contacts highly likely. Ignoring potential exposure not only affects your health but puts loved ones at risk. PEP breaks this transmission chain immediately.

## Reduced Treatment Effectiveness

Starting antiretroviral therapy after HIV has established chronic infection is less effective than preventing infection with PEP. Once the virus integrates into your cellular DNA and creates reservoirs throughout your body, complete elimination becomes impossible. PEP works during the narrow window when elimination is still achievable.

## Psychological and Social Impact

Living with preventable HIV infection carries significant emotional burden, including anxiety, depression, stigma concerns, and relationship challenges. The psychological toll of knowing infection could have been prevented through timely PEP can be profound and lasting.

## Financial Burden

Lifetime HIV treatment costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, even with insurance. PEP's 28-day course, covered by the Telemed One plan, is exponentially more cost-effective than decades of chronic HIV management, regular laboratory monitoring, and treatment of complications.

# Comprehensive PEP Support Through GoTo Telemed

## Your Complete Care Journey

GoTo Telemed provides comprehensive, compassionate care throughout your entire PEP experience, from initial consultation through follow-up testing and beyond. Our integrated telehealth approach ensures you receive expert guidance without the barriers of traditional healthcare access.



## Why Choose GoTo Telemed for PEP Care?

### Immediate Access

No appointments needed—connect with specialists instantly, any time of day or night. Our 24/7 availability means you can start PEP within the optimal timeframe regardless of when exposure occurs.

### Complete Privacy

Discuss sensitive health concerns from the comfort and privacy of your home. No waiting rooms, no judgment—just confidential, professional care focused entirely on your wellbeing.

### Coordinated Care

From initial consultation through final testing, one integrated platform manages your entire PEP journey. All specialists access your complete record, ensuring seamless, coordinated treatment.

# Supporting Your Health During PEP Treatment

## Nutrition Guidelines for PEP

Proper nutrition supports medication tolerance, immune function, and overall wellbeing during your 28-day PEP course. These dietary strategies help minimize side effects and optimize treatment effectiveness.

### Foods to Emphasize

- **Lean proteins:** Chicken, fish, beans, lentils support immune cell production
- **Complex carbohydrates:** Whole grains, sweet potatoes provide sustained energy
- **Probiotic-rich foods:** Yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut support digestive health
- **Colorful vegetables:** Leafy greens, peppers, carrots provide antioxidants
- **Healthy fats:** Avocados, nuts, olive oil reduce inflammation
- **Hydrating foods:** Watermelon, cucumber, citrus fruits maintain hydration

### Foods to Limit or Avoid

- Alcohol (interferes with medication metabolism)
- High-fat fried foods (worsens nausea)
- Excessive caffeine (may increase anxiety, disrupt sleep)
- Processed sugars (causes energy crashes)
- Spicy foods if experiencing GI upset

### Meal Timing Strategies

Take PEP medications with a light meal or snack containing protein and complex carbohydrates to minimize nausea. Small, frequent meals (5-6 per day) are better tolerated than three large meals. Keep bland snacks like crackers, bananas, or applesauce available for nausea management.



## Hydration Protocols

Adequate hydration is essential for kidney function while taking PEP medications. Aim for 8-10 glasses of water daily, more if you experience diarrhea or vomiting. Herbal teas, coconut water, and electrolyte drinks provide variety while maintaining hydration.

## Supplement Considerations

- ❑ **Consult Before Taking:** Always discuss supplements with your GoTo Telemed provider before starting, as some may interact with PEP medications. We can recommend appropriate options for your specific regimen.

### Generally Safe Supplements

- Vitamin D3 (supports immune function)
- Vitamin B-complex (reduces fatigue)
- Probiotics (supports gut health)
- Ginger (reduces nausea)

### Avoid Without Medical Guidance

- St. John's Wort (reduces PEP effectiveness)
- High-dose vitamin C (may interfere with medications)
- Garlic supplements (potential interactions)

# Your Path Forward with GoTo Telemed

## Telemed One: Comprehensive Coverage for PEP and Beyond

Our Telemed One plan provides complete peace of mind during PEP treatment and ongoing preventive care. This comprehensive membership covers 100% of your telehealth needs with zero out-of-pocket costs, no copays, and no deductibles. Access all medical specialties—from infectious disease experts to mental health counselors—with unlimited consultations whenever you need support.



### 24/7 Availability

Connect with specialists anytime, day or night, including weekends and holidays. Both synchronous video visits and asynchronous messaging ensure you get answers exactly when you need them.



### Rapid Medication Delivery

PEP medications and any supportive prescriptions delivered quickly to your doorstep. No pharmacy visits required—we coordinate everything for maximum convenience.



### Unlimited Care

Schedule as many follow-up visits as needed throughout your PEP course and beyond. Routine televisits support ongoing prevention, wellness checks, and chronic condition management.

### Take Action Now

Don't wait—every hour counts after potential HIV exposure. Book your confidential PEP consultation immediately.

[Schedule PEP Consultation](#)

## Holistic Wellness Support

Beyond medical treatment, GoTo Telemed supports your complete wellbeing during PEP therapy. Our integrated approach addresses physical, mental, and emotional health through evidence-based complementary practices.



### Stress-Reduction Practices

Guided meditation, gentle yoga sequences, and breathing exercises help manage anxiety during treatment. Our wellness coaches provide personalized techniques for emotional balance and sleep quality.



### Breathwork for Nausea

Diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation reduce medication-related nausea and promote relaxation. Practice 4-7-8 breathing: inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7, exhale for 8.



### Sleep Hygiene

Combat PEP-related insomnia with consistent sleep schedules, bedroom environment optimization, and relaxation routines. Avoid screens 1 hour before bed, maintain cool room temperature, and try gentle stretching.

## Connect With GoTo Telemed

We're here to support you every step of the way. Reach out through any of these channels for questions, appointment scheduling, or general inquiries about our services.

### Contact Information

- **Website:** [www.gototelemed.com](http://www.gototelemed.com)
- **Email:** [info@gototelemed.com](mailto:info@gototelemed.com)
- **Emergency PEP Line:** Available 24/7 through patient portal

### Follow Us on Social Media

- **Instagram:** [@gototelemed](https://www.instagram.com/gototelemed)
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*Your health and wellbeing are our top priorities. We're committed to providing judgment-free, expert care precisely when you need it most.*

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