PrEP covered by student health insurance at Columbia? [1]

Dear Alice,

I was wondering if Columbia students under Aetna insurance can get Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) prescriptions (such as Truvada) to lower risks of HIV infections. As a homosexual member of the Columbia community, I would like to know if this is something I can bring up with my primary doctor here at Columbia Health.

Thanks

Answer

Dear Reader,

The short answer to your question is yes! The student health insurance plan (through Aetna) will cover the cost of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in the form of Truvada. Another piece of good news: Gilead, the manufacturer of Truvada also has a prescription co-pay assistance program for the drug [2].

PrEP is the use of an antiretroviral drug (Truvada) to prevent HIV infection in HIV negative individuals who are at significant risk of becoming HIV positive. Recent research has demonstrated that the use of this medication has significantly reduced the risk of HIV infection in men who have sex with men, injection drug users, heterosexual cisgender women, and transgender women. Reader, you mention that as a homosexual member of the Columbia community, the answer to this question is especially important to you. About two-thirds of HIV transmission in the United States occurs among men who have sex with men, making PrEP especially relevant to this group. That said, PrEP is effective in reducing the risk of HIV transmission among all populations, regardless of sexual orientation. Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) ? taken after potential exposure by someone who is not known to be HIV negative ? is also available through Columbia Health. For more information on both medications, check out the related Q&A HIV prevention with PEP, PrEP, and ART medications [3].

You can begin the process of obtaining PrEP or PEP by contacting Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) [4] to make an initial appointment (located in Columbia Health's Medical Services) [5]. In the meantime, the Safer Sex Map [6] may also be a helpful resource to locate free male and female condoms on campus. Student or not ? if you live in New York City and do not have insurance, the NYC Health Department Enroller (available by calling 311) can provide assistance in getting PrEP under Medicaid or low-cost insurance and through
payment assistance programs. Some clinics also provide PEP for free. Check out this website for free and confidential clinics [7] in New York. Additional options for uninsured individuals seeking payment assistance are offered through the Gilead website [8] as well.

Columbia Health [9] is committed to ensuring that the process of obtaining PrEP is simple, non-judgmental, supportive, and relatively rapid so that students feel as comfortable as possible accessing it. Hopefully, this will put you at ease if you decide to bring up this topic with your primary care provider at Columbia Health.

Alice!
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Published date:
Mar 13, 2015
Last reviewed on:
Mar 13, 2015

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