

No new infections during research on preventive HIV pill

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a pill containing HIV inhibitors that can prevent HIV infection.

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Dit is de omschrijving

Over the past three years, the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) has been studying the practical applicability of preventive HIV medicines as a valuable complement to the current HIV prevention strategy in Belgium. No new infections were detected in the group of 200 gay men taking this preventive HIV pill. Since mid-2017, this treatment has been approved for reimbursement in Belgium.

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a pill containing HIV inhibitors that can prevent HIV infection. It is intended for temporary use by seronegative people, at increased risk of becoming infected. For three years, the [Be-PrEP-ared project](#) explored the willingness of gay men and transgender women with an increased risk of HIV to use PrEP, their adherence to the therapy, the way they experienced the use of PrEP and whether their condom use had changed as a result. This was the first PrEP study in Belgium.

Dr. Bea Vuylsteke of ITM coordinated the study: "A PrEP pill is a real barrier that prevents the HIV virus from establishing itself in our body. For those who, for whatever reason, prefer not to use a condom, this is a very reliable medicine. No infection was found during the study in the group of gay men at increased risk of HIV."

Thanks in part to these encouraging first results of the Be-PrEP-ared project, Minister Maggie De Block decided [to reimburse the preventive aids inhibitors from June 2017](#) via the Belgian AIDS Reference Centres.

Timely testing and early treatment of HIV, in addition to the promotion of safe sex, are central to the Belgian HIV prevention strategy. PrEP may possibly constitute a valuable complement for certain groups of men who have sex with men, and where condom use is not always guaranteed. However, PrEP does not offer protection against other sexually transmitted infections.

Prof. Marie Laga of ITM: "We have long been looking for additional means to reduce the number of new HIV infections in Belgium. Our study confirms that PrEP can offer potential added value to defeat the epidemic," says Prof. Laga.

According to the latest figures from [Sciensano](#), 890 new diagnoses were made in Belgium last year, mainly in gay men and people from sub-Saharan Africa. This is a decrease of 27% compared to the peak of 2012. More than 80% of HIV infections in Belgian men have been transmitted through men having sex with men.

It is estimated that 2000 people started PrEP in Belgium, almost all of them gay men. About 600 of these are being monitored by ITM. "Although this is a promising result, it is still too early to observe an effect of this preventive medication in high-risk groups in the 2017 HIV figures," says Marie Laga.

The Institute for Tropical Medicine carried out the Be-PrEP-Ared study in collaboration with organisations specialised in sexual health such as Sensoa and çavaria. The project was funded by the Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO).