



# PrEP *in the* USA

## CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEX, FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

**THE PREVENTIVE HIV MEDICATION PREP IS CAUSING SOME HEATED DISCUSSIONS ON THE AMERICAN GAY SCENE, IN A SIMILAR WAY TO WHEN THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL WAS INTRODUCED IN THE 1960S. SOME CONSIDER PREP TO BE A GATEWAY TO PROMISCUITY THAT TRIVIALISES THE AIDS CRISIS OF THE 1980S, WHILE OTHERS SEE IT AS THE DRUG THE GAY COMMUNITY HAS BEEN WAITING FOR TO TAKE AWAY SEX'S SCARE FACTOR. SO, WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUVADA?**

TEXT: ZVEZDANA VUKOJEVIC

"We had a date and he only wanted to do it raw. I refused to. He was a lot younger, and felt I was exaggerating and even laughed at me. I never saw that guy around anywhere after that. The difference with him was that, being 49, I had been through the AIDS crisis," said Alec Baker, a slightly-frail figure from New York, sporting a well-groomed beard. Over the past few years, he has experienced a more reckless form of sexual behaviour; young gay men in particular behave as if HIV isn't all that big of a deal, which he finds quite disconcerting: "I wonder if my own boundaries were starting to blur? What if I got drunk and was tired and made the wrong decision because of it?" When Alec got himself tested last autumn, they asked him if he would take part in a PrEP study. "Naturally I didn't have to think about that too hard."

Alec certainly isn't the only person to grasp the opportunity either. According to PrEP manufacturer Gilead Sciences, thousands of people in the US are voluntarily taking part in the trials. Others receive their medication through Medicaid, (a state-run health provider for impoverished US citizens) and approximately 2,500 Americans get PrEP on prescription at their local pharmacy.

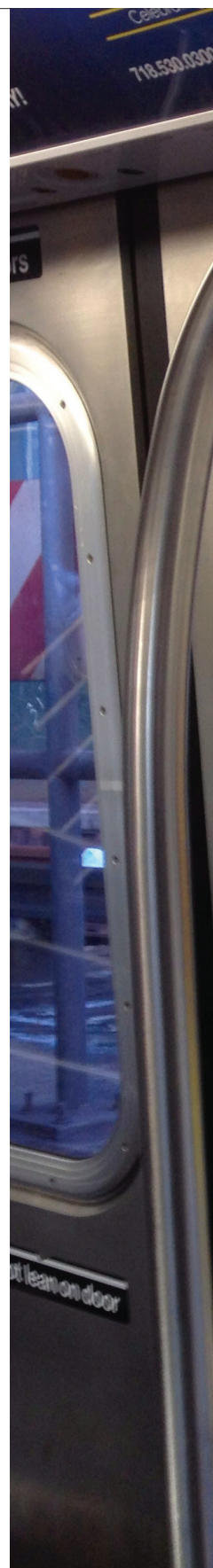
Last summer, the Center for Disease Control, as well as the World Health Organization, advised all homosexual men to use condoms simultaneously with PrEP, because the number of HIV infections among gay men remains high: there are some 600,000 American men (bi and gay) who are infected, and over half are either using their medication in the wrong manner, or not using any medication at all. Since then, prescriptions for PrEP have supposedly been flying over the counter, although there isn't any recent data available relating to this period. An estimated 10,000 people in the US are currently taking PrEP.

### Magic pill

In the streets of Hell's Kitchen, New York, with its variety of gay bars, from hipster to preppy, and sporty to cowboy, PrEP is the hot topic of conversation all across the board. Everyone knows what it is; whether via TV adverts (unlike a lot of other nations, pharmaceutical firms in the US are allowed to advertise), the media, friends taking it, or sexual health clinics. The latter is where 27-year-old Trent first heard about it. He left Utah for New York, and saw how HIV has spread rapidly over the past few years, which is why he now always books in for a quarterly check-up at the Chelsea clinic: "I've heard some people say that PrEP gives you an excuse to behave like a slut. Whether you're monogamous or not, you're still going to have sex. With PrEP, you have a good time with anyone and are still safe, so why not?"

The abbreviation PrEP stands for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis. It's a combination pill consisting of two HIV medicines (tenofovir/emtricitabine) named Truvada, and was approved in 2004 as medication to treat those living with HIV. In 2012, it was the first medicine to be approved by the FDA for a new purpose: the prevention, rather than treatment, of HIV. Only strict daily use will render 99 per cent protection against contracting the virus – you can't just take it on the days you're about to have unprotected or 'risky' sex.

Back in Hell's Kitchen, Greg (31) and Mario (33) are having a smoke outside a restaurant. Greg's best friend has been taking PrEP for the past three months, because his doctor recommended it on account of 'his lifestyle'. His health insurance won't cover everything any longer (PrEP costs around 1,000 dollars a month), so his doctor advised him to get in touch with the manufacturer: "They're prepared to supply







“THEY WANT EVERY GAY IN  
THE US, NO, THE WORLD, TO  
TAKE THIS STUFF”

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**“HIV+”**  
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it free of charge if you don't have health insurance. You have to fill in some paperwork together with the doctor, but that doesn't take very long." When Greg first heard about this 'magic' pill, he initially thought that people would probably become promiscuous. "After I'd done a bit of reading up on it, I realised that it's actually a positive thing. It's not about being a slut, it's about being responsible." Would they be inclined to take the pill if they were offered it? Mario nods yes vigorously, and is even keen to double the safety level: "I say use condoms and take the pill as well. What's the problem if that can help to prevent a disease?"

### Poison

This pill might be able to launch a global sexual revolution, but until now it has primarily resulted in a discussion regarding promiscuity, and has left older and younger gay men on opposing sides. Veteran AIDS campaigner Larry Kramer, 79, had something to add on the subject in *The New York Times*. Thirty-three years ago, he wrote the autobiographical play *The Normal Heart* about gay New Yorkers with AIDS, and said in an interview: "Everybody who voluntarily takes an anti-viral every day has got to have rocks in their head,"

due to all of the side effects the medicine supposedly causes. Kramer claims it is a cop-out to take Truvada instead of using a condom, because, as he puts it: "There is something cowardly to me about taking Truvada instead of using a condom. You're taking a drug that is poison to you, and it has lessened your energy to fight, to get involved, to do anything."

Alec Baker, on the other hand, can't see any potential pitfalls. "When they asked me what I hoped to get from the study, I said that I didn't want to be scared of sex any longer." After he was approved to take part in the Truvada study ("they look into what it means to the gay community, and stuff like that"), he was prescribed Truvada free of charge for a year starting on 6th February 2014.

He reads up online about trials that were done with PrEP. "There was one that ran in the Netherlands with prostitutes. A few of them became infected despite having taken the pill. The explanation provided was that of irregular use, so I've set up a daily alert on my phone and an email alert, so I don't forget to take my pill."

Every three months, medical staff take a blood sample, check his urine and conduct liver function tests. He doesn't think he has experienced any side effects as yet. Once, his liver values were a little off, but this was down to the fact that he had been involved in sports without taking enough liquids. "That was lucky, otherwise



### PrEP OUTSIDE THE US

PrEP is currently largely unavailable outside the US. In the UK, Truvada is only available through participation in a two-year study, although there are calls from campaigners for it to be made available on the NHS. Trials with gay men are also ongoing in many other countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, South Africa and Thailand. Last summer, the WHO issued an amended guideline which incorporated PrEP as a medicine for certain target groups for the first time. Gilead Sciences has not yet submitted a request to the European Medicines Agency, which means that PrEP cannot be accepted within the European market. It's not entirely clear why Gilead hasn't done so to date.



ALEC BAKER (LEFT)  
AND PHILIP SHUBIN

IMAGE: DAVID WAAGE

I wouldn't have been allowed to continue. They advised me to drink more water when I was taking part in sports. One thing I have noticed though is that my trousers are a bit baggier than before. Maybe my weight is being distributed slightly differently perhaps?" Trousers that fitted perfectly last year, now require a belt.

"Am I telling it right?" Alec asks his partner Philip Shubin, 57, who has joined us on the roof terrace of a sports bar served by shirtless barkeepers. Philip, a set designer, nods agreeingly. "We were actually on our way to the barber, but they'd closed already, so doing an interview instead is kind of fun." He doesn't feel much like taking part however.

Once you start talking about PrEP, it's not all that long before someone mentions the term 'Truvada whore'. It's the name given to (young) men who take the long blue pill daily and take pride in barebacking as much as they possibly can. Although they're no longer at risk from contracting HIV if they make sure they take the medication daily, they are at risk of getting other STIs. Type in #TruvadaWhore on Twitter or Instagram, and instantly you'll be overwhelmed by an endless parade of men offering themselves: "I'm a Truvada whore. Why don't you come around, my door's not locked." Truvada whores certainly aren't an exception on Grindr and other sex apps any longer. It's now become something of a badge of honour, sometimes literally, with people sporting it on t-shirts.

Aside from this user group, there are the somewhat older men who use Truvada for extra protection alongside condoms, in order to further reduce the limited risk that they run, or men who have an HIV-positive partner. The discussion about promiscuity is similar to the one that was held at the time concerning the birth control pill. By prescribing the pill, women would now be having a lot more sex...





Oh, the horror! The counter-argument that women will have sex anyway, but can now protect themselves against an unwanted pregnancy, is equally applicable in this situation – just substitute the word pregnancy with HIV. What matters here is that the receptive partner is able to protect themselves. Incidentally, half of

the prescriptions being issued are for women: women with an HIV-positive partner, women who do not want to have to depend on a man with regard to using a condom, or women within a risk group, such as prostitutes.

#### Cash cow

Two days earlier, blonde comedian Luke McCollum from New York hailed a cab, and caught a glimpse of a billboard advertising PrEP. He's about to open for Liza Lampanelli, a comedian known as the Queen of Mean due to her caustic jokes often of a racist and homophobic nature. The first thought that enters his mind, is that if there's a preventative medicine against HIV, there's also a remedy for curing AIDS. This is a real cash cow he reckons: the longer they keep us taking the stuff, the more money they're going to end up making from us. "Why do we have to be the guinea pigs yet again? They're aiming to get the entire gay community taking this stuff. How do we know what this stuff is doing to us?" Luke admits that PrEP sounds great, but why would you put it into your body for the rest of your life? "What are the long-term effects? I'm more for acting responsibly than taking a pill. Control the self-destructive behaviour that puts you in that position of displaying risky sexual behaviour."

His friend is a holistic doctor, and apologises in advance for sharing his conspiracy theory, but continues: "They want every gay in

## "EVERYBODY WHO VOLUNTARILY TAKES AN ANTI-VIRAL EVERY DAY HAS GOT TO HAVE ROCKS IN THEIR HEAD"

the US, no, the world, to take this stuff. Are they trying to poison the gay community? That was my initial thought, and that is fucked up. I've not got the greatest faith in pharmaceutical companies anyhow. They act as if they've got our best interests at heart, issuing free pills, but eventually it's going to make them a huge amount of money." Like so many people, he wonders what the effects are if the pill is not taken regularly, and what the resistance, and perhaps even the mutation of the virus might be. "We simply don't know!"

Luke saw a reaction on Facebook from a Hollywood actress "of a certain age" ("I'm useless at names") that read: "I'm sick of these young gays talking about HIV as if it's not that big of a deal. I still remember all of my friends dying. They pretend that none of that ever happened, because now you can take a pill and not have to worry about anything." Luke especially started thinking about things due to the influence of AIDS campaigner Larry Kramer, who we mentioned earlier: "Eighteen-year-olds only know about the AIDS epidemic from films, while those in their forties and fifties watched their entire group of friends die from it."

#### Survivor guilt

Alec has also started to reflect on things, especially his sex life. Before the study, he had to complete questionnaires that make him aware of his sexual behaviour: "What does it mean when I commit a

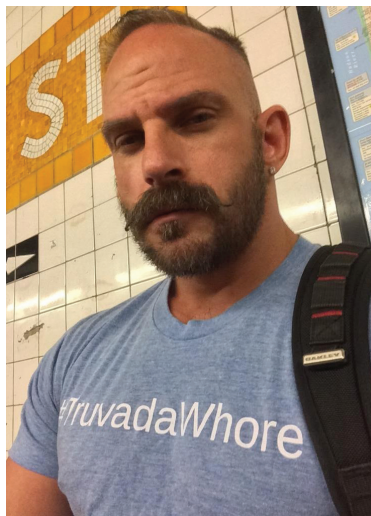


LUKE MCCOLLUM (LEFT)  
WITH HIS FRIEND, A  
HOLISTIC DOCTOR

certain sexual act? Is this the same as love or not? Which emotion do I associate with this act? I find that very interesting, because I hadn't really given it that much thought before." In addition, he also used to be a bit more lax when it came to safe sex, so he now goes for check-ups more often, going twice a year instead of just once. He is worried about the increase in promiscuity within the gay community. "I was scared because I could see the community changing, and I was afraid that I'd meet more people who were insistent on having raw sex."

Twenty years ago, he was still seeing seriously-emaciated people walking the streets, who, as he put it, looked like they were "in serious trouble". He means AIDS, but won't say the word out loud. This has caused him to be anxious when he's in bed and unable to really enjoy sex: "I've always been afraid of sex." Psychological research conducted by the Hunter College has revealed that half of the gay men who lived through the AIDS epidemic primarily think of HIV while having sex. "It's like it happened only yesterday that a gay couple passed me by, and I heard one of them say 'I want to die'. They were just like ghosts. I don't see that on the streets any more. People who are infected these days just take their medication and they're fine," Alec says. He pauses briefly, while he consults with his partner: "If there's anything you'd like to add..." Philip orders another Coke. "No, this is your story," he replies. Alec continues: "I haven't lost anyone from my immediate group of friends and don't suffer from survivor's guilt. I do know people my age though who watched their circle decrease month by month."

Suddenly, his boyfriend Philip takes over: "I've been HIV positive since 1981. In 1996, I became very ill, and that was when the first HIV cocktail became available. When I arrived at the hospital, I was more dead than alive. If I had been like that three weeks earlier, the cocktail wouldn't have been available yet, and I wouldn't be sitting here right now. I would have died without this medication." He watched his entire group of friends die from AIDS and his family were already planning his funeral when the anti-viral remedy started to kick in. Now, his viral load is non-detectable and his T-cell count is higher – a sign that his immune system has a firm grip on the infection. Nevertheless, he was apprehensive for a long time about dating an HIV-negative man. "Not only would there be a slim chance that I could infect that person, but it's heavy going in an emotional sense as well. I've had a few long relationships with HIV-negative people. In the beginning, my status wasn't a problem. After a few years, though, they started to back away from me, physically. I don't and can't really blame them, because if I were in their position, I wouldn't even start



**"I'M A TRUVADA WHORE. WHY DON'T YOU COME AROUND, MY DOOR'S NOT LOCKED."**

up anything with someone who has the same status as me." When Philip was ditched for the second time, he swore he would never love anyone again. "I just didn't have it in me any more. Especially where HIV-negative people were concerned."

The couple met each other about three-and-a-half years ago, and hit it off straight away. "And then he ran off," said Alec. "He'd do that every time we were flirting with one another." Philip explains: "He kept asking me out, however many times I rejected him, because I wanted someone who was also HIV positive."

Meanwhile, the years have rolled on. Philip came out of the 1990s suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, after being the only one of his friends to survive the AIDS epidemic. "I feel like a veteran of the AIDS crisis. I fought in the war, watched my comrades die, and returned home with nothing but nightmares..." His voice falters and his eyes become moist. Alec gives his hand a reassuring squeeze.

One day, Philip woke up and realised he had been single for ten years, due to his rejecting anyone who didn't have HIV. Then the phone rang. On the other side of the line was Alec: the same Alec who had been tirelessly asking for a chance for the past three years. "It was the very day that I realised that I wanted to open up again," says Philip.

Alec knew it would take two weeks before Truvada became effective. He utilised that period to think things over. What would taking that pill actually do to him psychologically? He was afraid that he'd become overindulgent in sex. "I'm 49. These might be my last sexually-active years." But that wasn't the case. "The main thing was I didn't have to be scared of sex, and I said to myself: 'I'm not afraid to be with someone who's HIV positive.' That made me feel a lot better too, because I knew why Philip had rejected me."

It wasn't until they had been dating for two or so weeks that Alec decided to reveal that he was now taking Truvada. "Keep in mind though that we started dating because Philip changed his mind, not because I was on Truvada. I didn't present myself to him in that manner. I didn't want to be a Truvada whore. Truvada helped us erode the boundaries between positive and negative." The story had quite a twist, says Philip glowingly: "We've now been together for six months and a day. Finally we're no longer afraid of sex."

The only thing that still worries Alec, if he unexpectedly became HIV positive, is that it might be a dangerous strain of the virus, which could prove resistant to the majority of the medication currently available. "Then there are just a few options left. Hopefully there will be new medicines available by then."

Alec discusses the status of his boyfriend with his doctor. "Percentage-wise, we're safer using the pills than if we were to use condoms. We did decide not to ejaculate in one another. It made our doctor giggle a bit, and he said we were doing the right thing." ■

THE NAME ALEC BAKER HAS BEEN CHANGED FOR REASONS OF PRIVACY.

#### GET CLUED UP

The key to staying safe is knowing your status. While PrEP isn't widely available outside the US, there are plenty of organisations and charities that will provide you with the support and advice you need to make informed choices about your sexual health. In the UK, charities such as

Terrence Higgins Trust ([www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)) and GMFA ([www.gmfa.org.uk](http://www.gmfa.org.uk)) offer opportunities to discuss any anxieties, and get tested. If you do test positive for HIV, it's no longer the death sentence it once was – as long as it's caught early and medication is followed carefully.