New drug to prevent infections available here

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A new drug shown to be effective in preventing infections of the human immunodeficiency (HIV) virus in high-risk groups is now available in Singapore.

Known as PrEP or pre-exposure prophylaxis, the medicine – the first of its kind – is expected to reduce the number of new infections here, starting about 4,000 a year.

“The question is, how does it work to 4,000?” Ms Shev Kran, director of the SASUO (surgical and urological) training program at the National University Hospital (NUH), said. “It’s a drug that reduces the number of new infections, and it works by stopping HIV infection.”

Though it has been in use since mid-2012, Truvada was unexpectedly offered only by a few clinics and specialists, for instance, to the wives and partners of infected people.

But that changed in February when Dritemap, a center treating patients with infectious diseases, said there is “overwhelming evidence and international guidelines which now recommend PrEP as an important tool to help prevent HIV infection.”

In San Francisco, for instance, HIV infection rates have fallen as the number of PrEP prescriptions rose significantly, said Professor Joy Chan, founder and president of the clinic. Action for AIDS.

Reggular testing still crucial

While the number of new HIV infections in Singapore has stabilised in the last five years, it has increased in Asian countries, such as in men. Latest figures from the Ministry of Health show that nearly four in 10 persons are in a late stage of infection by the time they seek treatment. If left untreated, HIV can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), where the patient’s immune system has been permanently wrecked, leaving him open to opportunistic and life-threatening infections.

In 2011, said Dr Chan, “the average time for a new patient to have a new diagnosis of HIV” is 24 months. Truvada is taken only when the user knows he is HIV positive.

As PrEP is available only through dedicated PrEP clinics and is taken daily, Truvada is considered as the most practical and effective option.

“At the Aids conference last Saturday, the senior minister of state for health, Dr Amy Khor, said that those who do not know they have HIV can infect others. It is for HIV-negative people and those who do not have HIV infection, but who have a very high risk of getting it,” Dr Chan said.

There are some studies published in peer-reviewed journals which have shown that those who inject drugs.

As PrEP is taken only when the user knows he is HIV positive, the drug needs to be taken daily. That’s PrEP on demand.

What is PrEP?

PrEP, short for pre-exposure prophylaxis, is a medicine that can reduce a person’s chances of getting HIV infection. It is a prevention method that involves taking hold of and spread minimising the risk of acquiring HIV infection.

PrEP is taken before a person contracts HIV and is meant to be an additional tool to reduce the risk of infection from the disease. It is meant to supplement regular testing and consistent condom use, which are effective preventive measures against HIV.

The pill is taken once a day. It contains two medicines – tenofovir and emtricitabine – that are also used to treat HIV.

What do the studies show?

PrEP has been shown to reduce the risk of HIV infection through sex for gay and bisexual men, transsexual women, heterosexual men and women, as well as people who inject drugs.

It can cut the risk by more than 90 per cent without any follow-up care after you stop taking it.

Who is it for?

It is for HIV-negative people or those who do not have HIV infection, but who have a very high risk of getting it. It is meant to supplement regular testing and consistent condom use.

Are there any side effects?

Side effects are uncommon. Studies show that some patients might experience diarrhea, nausea or vomiting.

But severe cases are rare. Some patients reported having mild headaches, but no serious side effects were observed during clinical trials.

Where to get PrEP?

For more information, call 6293-9684 or send an e-mail to apptdsc@nsc.com.sg. Or visit www.prepfacts.org and Aids.gov.