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# New HIV-busting drugs

**INFECTION CONTROL:** AIDS cure far off but anti-retroviral drugs can fight risk

**T**HIRTY years into the AIDS epidemic, a cure remains elusive but a growing arsenal of drugs could end new infections, the World Health Organisation's HIV/AIDS chief said.

The key was figuring out how to best manage the latest advances, Gottfried Hirnschall said ahead of the International AIDS Conference that begins here on July 22.

Anti-retroviral drugs may reduce the risk of infected people passing on the virus and may prevent healthy people from becoming infected through sex with HIV-positive partners, but the new possibilities have also stirred controversy.

Still, these medications saved about 700,000 lives worldwide in 2010 alone, which experts have described as an extraordinary accomplishment.

Research breakthroughs in some countries "demonstrate that it is possible to really advance significantly in scaling up the response and even start to think about elim-

inating new infections", Hirnschall said.

The world now has 26 anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs on the market and more in the pipeline for treating people with human immunodeficiency virus, which has infected 60 million people and killed 25 million since the epidemic first emerged.

Hirnschall said drugs were better now than they used to be — less toxic, more robust, less likely to trigger resistance and more tolerable — but still not perfect.

Side effects remain a concern, with the WHO set to release its first global report on drug resistance in low- and middle-income countries tomorrow.

Research on using ARVs as a way to prevent HIV in healthy people — also known as pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP — has shown conflicting results, with some promise seen in studies on heterosexual couples and gay men who took the pills faithfully.

However, one major study of African women failed to show any protection from ARVs compared with a placebo and had to be stopped early.

A United States advisory panel has urged the Food and Drug Administration to approve the first-ever HIV prevention pill, Truvada by Gilead Sciences, for use in some high-risk populations.

A decision is expected by mid-September. It is already on the market as a treatment for people with HIV.

But some healthcare workers fear that the availability of a pill that could reduce the risk of getting HIV may encourage people to stop using condoms and spark a rise in risky sex behaviour.

Others are concerned about the ethics of providing HIV drugs to healthy people, when vast numbers of infected people across the world, still do not have access to life-saving treatments. **AFP**