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Green light for pill to curb HIV

EFFECTIVE: Truvada reduces risk of infection by 42pc among gays and 75pc in heterosexual couples

THE United States Food and Drug Administration on Monday approved the first drug shown to reduce the risk of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection, the latest milestone in the 30-year battle against the virus that causes AIDS.

The agency approved Gilead Sciences' pill Truvada as a preventive measure for healthy people who are at high risk of acquiring HIV through sexual activity, such as those who have HIV-infected partners.

The decision came less than two weeks after the agency approved another landmark product: the first over-the-counter HIV test that Americans could use in the privacy of their homes. The two developments were seen as the biggest steps in years toward curbing the spread of HIV in the US, which had held steady at about 50,000 new infections per year for the last 15 years.

"I think the combination of self-testing and a medicine that you can take at home to prevent infection could mean a whole new approach to HIV prevention that is a bit more realistic," said Dr Demetre Daskalakis of New York University's Langone Medical Centre, who served on the FDA panel that recommended approving Truvada.

While a positive step forward, Daskalakis added that Truvada would likely be unavailable for people without health insurance, who faced the greatest risk of acquiring HIV.

But HIV experts had raised concerns that patients might not use the drug correctly. Dr Tom Giordano of Baylor College of Medicine, who also served on the FDA panel that approved the drug, said Truvada must be taken every day to be effective, and would be most effective for a relatively small group of people.

The drug's label carried a warning that people should be tested to make sure they don't have HIV before starting Truvada.

Patients who already have the virus could develop resistance to the drug, making their disease more difficult to treat.

The once-a-day pill is a combination of two older HIV drugs, Emtriva and Viread.

Starting in 2010, studies showed that the drug could prevent people from contracting HIV when used as a precautionary measure. A three-year study found that daily doses cut the risk of infection in healthy gay and bisexual men by 42 per cent, when accompanied by condoms and counseling.

Last year, another study found that Truvada reduced infection by 75 per cent in heterosexual couples, in which one partner was infected with HIV and the other was not. **AP**