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Anti-HIV vaginal gel is 'milestone' — Campaigners

VIENNA: Campaigners in the fight against AIDS responded with a rousing cheer — leavened also with scientific caution — to test results, announced Monday, of a vaginal gel designed to protect women from HIV.

The prototype, in the second stage of a three-phase trial, reduced the risk of infection by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) by 39 per cent overall, but by 54 per cent among those women who used it most consistently.

Leading figures in the 29-year war on AIDS said the announcement was heart-warming news, especially for African women exposed to HIV through sex with a partner who refuses to wear a condom.

"We are giving hope to

women. For the first time we have seen results for a woman-initiated and -controlled HIV prevention option," said Michel Sidibe, executive director of the UN agency UNAIDS.

"If confirmed, a microbicide will be a powerful option for the prevention revolution and help us to break the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic."

The study "marks a significant milestone both for the microbicide research field and HIV prevention as a whole," said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the US National Institutes of Health.

World Health Organisation (WHO)

Director General Margaret Chan said she welcomed the findings.

"All new advances in HIV prevention, particularly for women, are exciting," Chan said in a press release.

If, in further research, the South African data are validated and the gel is proven to be safe and effective, "WHO will work with countries and partners to accelerate access to these products," she vowed.

More than 33 million people today are infected by HIV. More than two-thirds live in sub-Saharan Africa, where 60 per cent of new infections occur among women and girls.

The gel that was tested contains a one-per cent formulation of tenofovir. — AFP