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1.2 million patients on HIV drugs worldwide

DRUGS to repress the virus that causes AIDS reached 1.2 million more people last year, bringing the total to 5.2 million, the World Health Organisation said.

"This is the largest increase in people accessing treatment in a single year. It is an extremely encouraging development," said Hiroki Nakatani, the WHO's assistant director-general for HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

Since 2003, the number of people on anti-HIV drugs has risen 12-fold, the UN health agency said.

Despite the surge, only roughly half of the world's poor, badly infected people have access to the drugs, experts say. In 2008, a total of 9.5 million people were in need of the therapy, and the tally has risen since then because of more cases of infection.

Antiretroviral therapy is a combination of powerful drugs that prevent the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) from replicating in immune cells.

Administered at a key stage of infection, it can reduce the virus to negligible levels, allowing the patient to live an almost normal life, although there can often be bad side effects.

The WHO earlier this month issued new recommendations for earlier treatment of people with HIV, with the goal of eventually expanding the number of cared-for to 15 million.

HIV mortality could be reduced by a fifth between 2010 and 2015, and deaths from tuberculosis — the No 1 killer of people with HIV — slashed by up to 90 per cent, the WHO suggested.

At least 25 million people have died of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) since the disease first came to light in 1981.

At the end of 2008, more than 33 million people had HIV, and 2.7 million people that year became infected, according to UNAIDS last year.