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ROME: Researchers at a world AIDS conference on Monday stood up to cheer a trial proving that early use of drugs to treat HIV all but eliminates the risk of transmitting the killer virus through heterosexual intercourse.

Experts said the bold experiment marked a turning point in a disease that has claimed some 30 million lives and left 34 million people infected with HIV.

They said widening access to antiretroviral drugs would deliver a double whammy: millions of people infected by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) would be saved and millions of new infections would be averted.

But they stressed that the message of safe sex that has shadowed AIDS for the past three decades should not be abandoned.

And before "treatment as prevention" is launched as a strategy, it would need carefully crafted guidelines and billions of dollars in support, at a time when funding for AIDS is faltering.

"We are at an important tipping point," Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), told AFP.

"There is an extraordinary window of opportunity and the sooner we act on it and the more robustly we act on it, the quicker we'll achieve the goal of turning around the epidemic," he said.

"Now's the time to translate this science into action that can break the back of the epidemic," the group Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said. "The clock is ticking."

Casting aside their traditional reserve, delegates cheered and gave a standing ovation to Myron Cohen, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who led the landmark HPTN 052 trial.

The data had been initially unveiled to the press in May on the orders of monitors, who said the results were so startling that all participants had to be advised of the outcome on ethical grounds. -AFP