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US backs expanded AIDS therapy for prevention

WASHINGTON: US health authorities are recommending the daily use of anti-retroviral medication to prevent HIV infection for high-risk groups.

The new guidelines by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention unveiled this week recommends taking Truvada, a pill containing tenofovir and emtricitabine, based on studies that showed the drug can help reduce infection rates by more than 90 percent when taken every day.

Truvada is the only anti-retroviral drug approved for the prevention method known as pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. The Food and Drug Administration greenlighted the drug, made by Gilead Sciences, in 2012.

Up to 500,000 Americans could bene-

fit from this treatment, compared to just 10,000 people who currently take such medication. It is covered by insurance.

The CDC's new directives especially concern at-risk populations such as gay men who have sexual relations without a condom, heterosexuals with high-risk partners such as users of injected drugs, bisexual men who have unprotected sex and anyone who has regular sexual relations with partners who are known to be infected with HIV.

All users of injected drugs or people who share needles are also considered at risk.

The CDC says HIV testing is required before starting the therapy, to be renewed at least every three months.

The therapy aims to turn the tide

against a trend that has seen about 50,000 people get infected with HIV each year for the past 20 years, despite condom use campaigns.

But the CDC guidelines also "underscore (the) importance of counseling about adherence and HIV risk reduction, including encouraging condom use for additional protection."

Indeed, the health watchdog recognizes that nothing guarantees that the recommendations for the antiretroviral drugs will be followed by those people at substantial risk for HIV, stressing the urgency for action as the use of condoms decreases in gay men. A CDC study published in November showed a 20 percent increase of unprotected sex between gay men from 2005 to 2011. - AFP