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Nod for HIV prevention pill

US approves first-ever daily medicine to help healthy adults ward off virus

WASHINGTON: The first-ever daily pill to help prevent HIV infection was approved by US regulators for use by healthy adults who are at risk for getting the virus that causes AIDS.

Truvada, made by Gilead Sciences in California, has been on the market since 2004 and was approved by the Food and Drug Administration for a new use as a tool to help ward off HIV, in combination with safe sex and regular testing.

The pill as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has been hailed by

some AIDS experts as a potent new tool against human immunodeficiency virus, while other health care providers are concerned it could encourage risky sex behaviour.

In addition, the regimen is estimated to cost around US\$14,000 (RM44,800) per year, making it out of reach of many.

"Truvada alone should not be used to prevent HIV infection," said Debra Birnkrant, director of the division of antiviral products at the FDA.

"Truvada as PrEP represents another effective, evidence-based approach that can be added to other prevention methods to help reduce the spread of HIV."

The FDA said Truvada should be used as "part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy that includes other prevention methods, such as safe sex practices, risk reduction counselling, and regular HIV testing".

Truvada was previously approved as a treatment for people infected with HIV to be used in combination

with other antiretroviral drugs.

The decision by the FDA followed the advice of an independent panel in May that supported Truvada for prevention in uninfected people, after clinical trials showed it could lower the risk of HIV in gay men and heterosexual couples.

One study of men who were sexually active with other men but were not infected with the virus that causes AIDS found 44 percent fewer infections in those taking Truvada versus a placebo.

Those in the study who took the

drug regularly had almost 73% fewer infections.

A second study on heterosexual couples in which one partner was infected with HIV and the other was not showed that Truvada reduced the risk of becoming infected by 75% compared with a placebo.

Common side effects were the same as experienced by people with HIV who were taking Truvada, and included diarrhoea, nausea, abdominal pain, headache, and weight loss. — AFP