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## We will 'ultimately end' AIDS, says US researcher

**WASHINGTON:** Thirty years after the AIDS epidemic surfaced, hope of conquering the deadly epidemic has never been greater, according to a longtime US leader in the AIDS fight, Anthony Fauci.

This hope has been spurred by recent advances towards a vaccine and new breakthroughs in treatment and prevention, said Fauci who has headed the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984.

"Over the last one-and-a-half years we have had several important advances which when you put them together and combine them are now pointing very strongly to the fact that we can essentially be able to ultimately control and obviously ultimately end the AIDS pandemic," he told AFP.

Previous discoveries include how male circumcision can reduce by almost 65% the risk of transmitting the human immunodeficiency virus, the effectiveness of vaginal microbicides and drug treatments that can prevent an infected pregnant mother from passing the disease to her child.

More recently, two clinical trials have shown just how effective antiretroviral drugs can be in preventing the spread of the incurable disease.

A study that ran from 2007-2009 and was published late last year showed that a combination of these drugs taken orally by uninfected gay men lowered their risk by 44% of becoming infected.

That rate rose above 70% when the pills were taken regularly, said Fauci who added he has "been in it now literally every day of my life for

the last 30 years". A clinical trial released this month involving mainly heterosexual couples in which one was infected and one was not showed a near elimination of the risk of transmission when the infected partner began an early regimen of antiretrovirals.

This trial is "extremely important because it proves the concept that when you seek out and treat them early rather than wait for their disease to advance, you have not only the well known beneficial effect of being good for the individual patient, but you have a very powerful

secondary effect of preventing the transmission from the infected partner to their healthy sexual partner," said Fauci.

The NIAID and its researchers have been at the forefront of the fight against AIDS since the epidemic first surfaced in June 1981.

With regard to the hunt for a reliable vaccine, researchers have found some hope after 20 years of failure in a 2009 clinical trial carried out in Thailand.

"The vaccine trial in Thailand was only 31% effective, however that is at least a proof of concept that we can do better."

In 2010, teams of researchers identified two antibodies in a single individual which when combined in the lab blocked 90% of HIV strains known in the world.

Now that research is honing in on what specific part of the virus should be isolated for a vaccine.

"So if we are going to have a vaccine this year or next year or the year after, we don't know, but we are certainly making considerable progress." - AFP