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Pill taken before, after sex may prevent HIV

> Scientists hail discovery of 'game changer'

LONDON: A HIV prevention pill taken by gay men before and after sex dramatically reduced the risk of virus transmission, according to the results of a clinical trial released on Tuesday.

Results of a major UK trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) have been described as "extremely exciting" and a "game changer" by leading specialists.

The Proud study found that PrEP cut the risk of HIV infection among gay men considered to be at high risk by an unprecedented 86%.

Despite major advances in the fight against HIV/Aids in recent decades, the infection rate among men who have sex with men remains stubbornly high in the UK, and the results of the trial have led to calls for PrEP to be offered free by the NHS.

The study was funded by government agencies, the Medical Research Council and Public Health England, and a senior panel of NHS

experts is already considering how PrEP could be introduced.

With evidence of its effectiveness now established, it will have to consider whether the pills, which will cost £423 (RM2,400) per month for each patient, will be cost-effective, and what the criteria should be for accessing them.

PrEP has been available to at-risk groups in

the United States since 2012.

The Proud trial, which took place across 12 NHS trusts in Brighton, London, York, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield, was set up to provide real-world evidence on the pill's effectiveness, and to answer outstanding questions, such as whether providing it would lead to reduced use of condoms.

Some 545 HIV-negative gay men, who were sexually active and had recently had unprotected sex, were recruited to the study. Early findings proved so encouraging that in

October last year the trial was sped up to ensure 269 men whose access was going to be deferred were given the drug straight away.

Among the 276 men given PrEP immediately, there were only three HIV infections in the first year of the study, compared with 19 among the deferred group.

The pill used in the trial, *truvada*, is a combination of anti-retroviral drugs *tenofovir* and *emtricitabine* which has previously been used to treat HIV infection.

Developed by *Gilead*, its newly established ability to prevent as well as treat the virus marks a major turning point in efforts to combat HIV among high-risk groups.

"These results are extremely exciting and show PrEP is highly effective at preventing HIV infection in the real world," said *Sheena McCormack*, professor of clinical epidemiology at *University College London*. - *The Independent*