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## WAR ON AIDS

# Experts develop anti-HIV drug

Pill taken before sex stops transmission of virus but it is still undergoing trials

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Scientists have developed a pill to be taken before sex that stops transmission of HIV and is already being prescribed to a limited number of patients.

Although studies are still ongoing, one doctor in the US, Marcus Conant, a university lecturer, physician and out-spoken advocate for people infected with HIV, is already prescribing the drug to some of his patients who indulge in risky sexual adventures.

Actually there are two such drugs, of which tenofovir is a single daily pill. The other is a two-in-one daily pill called Truvada, which contains tenofovir plus a drug called emtricitabine.

Conant, chief medical officer for Presidio Pharmaceuticals, Inc., who was among the first physicians to identify Aids in 1981, is giving the drugs to gay men and people with multiple sex partners unlikely to use any protection.

This strategy is called pre-exposure prophylaxis, and is similar to what is given

to people who may be exposed to the virus accidentally, for example rape victims.

Although currently only available to a limited number of people, this is set to change very soon.

The drugs are being tested in several large human trials, with the first results due next year.

One human trial of tenofovir has been completed among 936 women in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon, sending strong signs that the concept may work where vaccines and microbicides have failed.

In the study, there were six infections in the placebo group and only two in those taking the drug, but the numbers were too small to rule out the possibility that this was down to chance, according to a report in the *NewScientist*.

### Drug users

Ongoing trials include 2,400 injecting drug users in Thailand, 1,200 heterosexual men and women in Botswana and 3,000 gays in five other countries.

Ms Sheena McCormack, a specialist in HIV prevention and leader in clinical epidemiology at Imperial College London is also offering a similar treatment in her clinic to people who have had unprotected sex with someone in a high-risk group. She says such a drug would provide an extra option.

"People could pop a pill on a Friday night and be covered for the whole weekend," she told *NewScientist*.