

## RESEARCH

# Male circumcision cuts Aids risk,

Youths must be told that it's not a cure-all, warn experts

By DONALD McNEIL Jr

**C**ircumcision appears to reduce a man's risk of contracting Aids from heterosexual sex by half, US health officials said yesterday.

And directors of the two largest funds for fighting the disease said they would consider paying for circumcision in high-risk countries.

The announcement on infection rates was made by officials of the National Institute of Health as they halted two clinical trials in Kenya and Uganda on the grounds that not offering circumcision to all the men taking part would be unethical. The trials confirmed a study done last year in South Africa.

Aids experts immediately

welcomed the finding. "This is very exciting news," said Mr Daniel Halperin, an HIV specialist at the Harvard Centre for Population and Development, who has argued that circumcision slows the spread of Aids in the parts of Africa where it is common.

## More susceptible

In an interview from Zimbabwe, Mr Halperin said: "I have no doubt that as word of this gets around, millions of African men will want to get circumcised, and that

will save many lives."

Uncircumcised men are thought to be more susceptible because the underside of the foreskin is rich in Langerhans cells, sentinel cells of the immune system, which attach easily to the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes Aids. The foreskin also often suffers small tears during intercourse.

But experts also cautioned that circumcision is no cure-all. It only lessens the chances that a man will catch the virus.

Circumcision is "not a



Young initiates wait to undergo traditional circumcision. Research shows that the surgical procedure can reduce the risk of contracting Aids among men. Photo/FILE

magic bullet, but a potentially important intervention," said Dr Kevin M. De Cock, director of HIV/Aids for the World Health Organisation.

Sex education messages for young men need to make it clear that "this does not mean that you have an absolute protection," said Dr Anthony S. Fauci, an Aids researcher and director of the Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

## Safe sex

The two trials, conducted by researchers from universities in Illinois, Maryland, Canada, Uganda and Kenya, involved nearly 3,000 heterosexual men in Kisumu, Kenya, and nearly 5,000 in Rakai, Uganda. None were infected with HIV. They were divided into circumcised and uncircumcised groups, given safe sex advice (although many presumably did not take it), and retested regularly.

The trials were stopped this week by the NIH Data Safety and Monitoring Board after data showed that the Kenyan men had a 53 per cent reduction in new HIV infection. Twenty two of the 1,393 circumcised men in that study caught the disease, compared with 47 of the 1,391 uncircumcised men. In Uganda, the reduction was 48 per cent.

Those results echo the finding of a trial completed last year in Orange Farm, a town in South Africa, which demonstrated a reduction of 60 per cent among circumcised men.

The two largest agencies dedicated to fighting Aids said they would be willing to pay for circumcisions, which they have not before because there was too little evidence that it worked.

Dr Richard G.A. Feachem, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, tuberculosis and malaria, which has almost \$350 billion (\$5 billion) in pledges, said in a television interview that if a country submitted plans to conduct sterile circumcisions, "it's very likely that our technical panel would approve it."

Male circumcision also benefits women. For example, a study of the medical records of 300 Ugandan couples last year estimated that circumcised men infected with HIV were about 30 per cent less likely to transmit it to their female partners.

**Millions of men will want to get circumcised, and that will save many lives**

— Dr Halperin

## Surgery doesn't prevent HIV infection, says WHO

By NATION Reporter

Circumcised men can still be infected with HIV, the virus that causes Aids, the World Health Organisation has said.

And if a man is HIV-positive, he can infect his sexual partners.

Reacting to results of a study which showed the operation can cut the rate of HIV infection, WHO said

male circumcision should never replace other known effective prevention methods. Instead, it should always be considered as part of a comprehensive prevention package, which includes correct and consistent use of male or female condoms, reduction in the number of sexual partners, delaying the onset of sexual relations, and HIV testing and counselling, the WHO said.

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