Scientists fail to agree on whether contraceptives expose women to Aids

BY GATONYE GATHURA

gathura@ke.nationmedia.com

Medical experts under the World Health Organisation have failed to

make a conclusive decision whether pills, injectables and other hormonal contraceptives put women at a higher risk of getting or transmitting HIV.

After reviewing a recent study car·

Tied out among 3,800 couples - in

Kenya, Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa,

Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia and other countries - which have linked hormonal contraceptives such as the Depo Provera to higher risks of women acquiring HIV or transmitting the virus to partners, the WHO has called for more studies.

In a statement, it has however advised women to continue using the pill

or injectable birth control methods without fear that they are exposed to

a higher risk of getting HIV, but with a strong caution for those on Depo

Provera who are especially advised to use condoms for protection.

**Caution women**

A team of experts, under WHO,

among them Dr Nelly Rwamba

Mugo of Kenyatta National Hospital

and who was involved in the Kenya

study, recommended that the WHO

modify its guidelines in the use of

contraceptives and caution women

especially opting for Depo Provera to

also make sure they use condoms.

The group recommended that a new·

clarification be added to WHO's medical

eligibility criteria for contraceptive

use for women using progestogen only

injectable.

Depo Provera, one of the most

popular injectable contraceptives in

Kenya, falls under this category.

"Because of the inconclusive nature

of the body of evidence on possible

increased risk of HIV acquisition,

women using the progestogen-only

contraception should be strongly advised

to also always use condoms:'

they say in a technical statement prepared

after the meeting last week.

"Our recommendations on the use

of contraceptives does not change,

and go as per recommendations of the

World Health Organisation:' the director

of medical services at the Ministry

of Public Health, Dr Shahnaz Sharif,

told the *Nation* yesterday.

Experts suspect that some contraceptives

erode the vaginal tissue

making it easier for HIVto penetrate

in an uninfected women, and hence

put their partners at a bigger risk

than those not using such birth control method.

Chemical changes

It is also suspected that this class

of contraceptives which contain the

compound progesterone may induce

some chemical changes in the vagina

that make HIV survival easier.

Dr Sharif said injectables remained

the most popular birth control methods

in the country, but implants,

which offer protection for between

five .and seven years could overtake

them within the next few years.

The Kenyan research had been

carried out by some of the best local

and international research institution

such as Harvard, Washington, California

and Emory universities in the US

and Nairobi and Moi universities in

Kenya, as well as the Kenya Medical

Research Institute.

Other institutions included,

Makerere University of Uganda and

University of the Witwatersrand in

South Africa.

According to the WHO, the team

of 75 experts from 18 member-countries

- five from Kenya - reviewed

20 studies but Kenya's expected representative Dr Shiphra Njeri Kuria from the Ministry of Public Heath and Sanitation did not attend.