WORRYING TREND | Alarm over increasing cases of people asking for pills meant to shield health professionals from infection

Youths abusing

drugs meant for

HIV emergencies

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**H**ealth workers and victims of sexual

crimes. It is usually administered to

those suspected to have come into

contact with HIV-infected material.

The treatment must start within

72 hours of exposure and consists

of a daily dosage of six tablets taken

for 28 days.

Doctors are worried that those

abusing the PEP pills do not take

the full dosage, thus not only risking

infection but also incubating a

virus which is resistant to medication.

The drugs are only available in

public hospitals and are provided at

no cost. It is illegal for chemists to

stock them.

When PEP was first introduced as

an emergency drug to prevent HIV

infection in the early 1990s, it was

praised as a scientific breakthrough.

At the time, it was meant for health

professionals who were at great risk

of being infected with the virus in the

line of duty. With time, it was made

available to people exposed to the

virus under circumstances, such as

rape or sexual assault.

In the recent past, however, there

has been a sharp rise in the number

of people seeking the drugs, after engaging

in unprotected sex especially

during holidays and weekends.

Many of those asking doctors to

give them the pills use them the same

way others use emergency contraceptives

— as an afterthought.

Many of them claim to have had

“accidents” which exposed them to

HIV. The accidents, according to

Nyeri County Aids and Sexually-transmitted

Diseases coordinator Jeniffer

Kiruri, range from sexual assault or a

needle prick to a torn condom.

She said that between July and September,

the Nyeri Provincial General

Hospital gave the pills to more than

100 patients, most of them young

people of 16 years and above.

This group is one of the most at

the risk of HIV infection.

**Ask doctors**

Dr Enoch Ondari, the Kisii Level

Five medical superintendent, said

the health centre received requests

for PEP occasionally especially during

weekends.

“People do come to our facility to

seek PEP services with the excuse

of a burst condom. Normally, this

happens during the weekends or on

Monday morning,” he said.

Hospital records indicate that more

men than women ask doctors for the

tablets.

Dr Martin Sirengo, the head of

National Aids and STI Control Programme

(Nascop), said there had

been an alarming rise in the number

of people abusing the drugs especially

after weekends.

“We cannot deny them the drug

because it is available,” he said.

But to qualify for a prescription,

one must undergo thorough testing

and provide contact details to the

doctor giving the tablets.

This procedure is meant to make

it difficult for middlemen to get the

drugs for free from public hospitals

and resell them.

Dr Juliana Atieno, the chief administrator

at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga

Teaching and Referral Hospital in

Kisumu, said the hospital was one

of those that had developed strict

guidelines on who should get PEP.

“Many people were coming for the

drug,” she said. “We had to lay down a

protocol. First, a person has to come

with the partner for testing,” she said.

“The partner must be traced for one

to get help.”

Dr Atieno warned that the drugs

should not be a licence for irresponsible

sexual behaviour.

“The drug’s effectiveness might

backfire if you skip a dose. Why do

you have to undergo that? You have

a good option of using a condom,”

she said.

Ms Monica Ndegwa, the Kieni

East District Public Health officer,

said the uptake of the drug could be

because young people wanted to take

short-cuts.

“Just like in pregnancy pills, young

people want to take short-cuts. My

advice is, before you engage in

anything, know the status of your

partner,” she said.

Mrs Christine Otieno, a programme

officer in HIV prevention at Kenyatta

National Hospital, said the demand

for the drug shoots up especially during

holidays and after weekends.

“We counsel the users first. They

must finish the dose, otherwise they

may be resistant to ARVs in the event

they acquire the virus,” she said.

According to her, some of those

seeking the drug are genuine cases

of rape.

“Others come with that excuse yet

they did it willingly, but we cannot

deny them the service,” she said.

Additional reporting by Muthini

Stephen

PEP is a combination of two

drugs: Aluvia and Combivin and

is only available at no cost in

public hospitals.

**A person for whom PEP has**

**been prescribed is required**

**to swallow six tablets in a day**

**for 28 days. One takes three**

**tablets — two Aluvia and one**

**Combivin — twice a day.**

PEP is not a simple morningafter

pill: it is a month-long

course of treatment.

**PEP treatment must begin**

**within 72 hours of exposure to**

**HIV. The sooner the treatment**

**starts the better.**

The drug is mostly used within

the health sector as part of a

comprehensive precautions

package that reduces staff exposure

to infectious hazards at

work.

**An exposed health care worker**

**should proceed with treatment**

**only after informed consent.**

Among the common side effects

of PEP are nausea and diarrhoea.

BACKGROUND

Tablets must be

taken for 28 days