

HIV prevention drug offers new option for women



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By Kyrie O'Connor

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A drug that is highly effective in preventing HIV infection has found a growing clientele in heterosexual women.

Doctors and advocates say the drug, Truvada, has the potential to empower women to assume more control over their own health protection. Truvada is the only drug approved by federal regulators for HIV prevention.

Dr. Charlene Flash, an infectious disease specialist at Harris Health System's Thomas Street Health Center, says about half of the patients she sees who take Truvada to prevent HIV infection are women.

"We're able to demonstrate that it works for them," she said, if they have partners who are HIV-positive or use injectable drugs, a key risk factor for infection.

Flash said she believes the drug represents a breakthrough for HIV-negative women, who have not always had the medical community's full attention as much of the focus remained on gay men.

"I've always thought, what about the girls?" said Flash, who is also an assistant professor in the division of infectious diseases at Baylor College of Medicine. "Why are women being ignored, especially minority women?"

Unlike condom use - still recommended for those on Truvada - this method is within the woman's control.

"So much about prevention has been left in the hands of the man," says Flash.

Truvada, made by the pharmaceutical company Gilead, has been used for years for treatment of HIV but was approved in 2012 to be taken daily as a preventive in HIV-negative patients. It has a 90 percent success rate when taken as instructed.

Its rollout has been soft, but it is available nationwide and it has found a niche among some women. A national survey by Gilead showed that of the 2,319 prescriptions the company examined, some 48.8 percent were issued to women - even though men who have sex with men are the group considered at highest risk.

Federal guidelines issued in May recommend that physicians consider pre-exposure prophylaxis for patients at high risk for HIV infection, including women and heterosexual men.

Important role

Dr. Dawn K. Smith, an epidemiologist at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said drugs to prevent infection - known as pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP - can play an important role. She noted that about 50,000 new HIV infections occur in the United States annually, and no vaccine or cure exists.

"Used along with other prevention strategies, PrEP has the potential to help at-risk individuals protect themselves and reduce new HIV infections in the United States," Smith said via email.

The CDC estimates that as many as 140,000 "discordant" heterosexual couples - those where one partner is HIV-positive and the other negative - could be PrEP users, Smith said.

An HIV-negative patient at the Thomas Street Health Center said using Truvada has eased her anxiety about potential infection from her HIV-positive partner.

"It has relieved some stress," said the patient, a woman, who asked not to be named. "I feel secure."

She and her partner have been together for five years and she has been on the drug since December with no side effects. Although the couple continues to use condoms, she no longer has to worry about becoming infected if one breaks.

"It's another form of protection," she said.

Flash said PrEP can help normalize the lives of women who have an HIV-positive partner.

"Many people who are HIV-positive are married or in long-term relationships," said Flash. "Partner infection is no longer an inevitability."

A spokesman for Gilead said the company is not marketing the drug as an HIV preventive measure, but is working with community and health-care organizations to provide accurate information and providing grants to raise awareness.

The drug is composed of two anti-HIV drugs, emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate. Its side effects may include kidney problems, weight loss and nausea.

Legacy Community Health Services offers Truvada at its HIV-specific clinic in Montrose. The clinic sees more gay men than women seeking the drug, said Amy Leonard, senior director of public health at Legacy.

Critic's questions

Some critics suggest that prescribing Truvada for HIV prevention could encourage risky sexual behavior. This makes both Leonard and Flash bristle. They said it reminded them of arguments that birth control would encourage promiscuity.

"These are the same questions that were asked about birth control," Flash said. "And we found out it's not true. If you're having risky sex, you're having risky sex."

So far, Truvada use has been largely covered by insurance. But it's expensive without insurance, some \$1,500 a month. Gilead offers some cost relief for the first year, and Legacy has a program that brings the cost down to \$500 a month.

Leonard says the door has just opened on pre-exposure prophylaxis, with other drugs likely to emerge. "It's not a silver bullet," said Flash. "It's part of a full arsenal of protection."