

**Publication:** BUSINESS DAY  
**Title:** HIV/AIDS battle rethink as new findings back safe sex  
**Publish date:** 26 July 2017

CONFERENCE

# HIV/AIDS battle rethink as new findings back safe sex

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Paris

A far cry from the 1990s campaign promoting abstinence and monogamy as HIV protection, scientists reported on new approaches on Tuesday allowing people to have all the safe sex they want.

Modern prevention strategies included drug-doused vaginal rings, male circumcision and taking antiretroviral therapy (ART) medication, experts said at an HIV/AIDS science conference held in Paris.

Research has yet to yield a cure or vaccine for the virus, which has infected more than 76-million people and has killed 35-million. It means prevention remains critical, says Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in Maryland, US, who attended the International AIDS Society conference.

There are 19.5-million people on ART, with 17.1-million more who need it. "Each year we add about 2-million to that group," Fauci said. "We must decrease the number of new infections."

Some advances have been made recently.

According to the World Health Organisation, there is "compelling evidence" that male circumcision reduces the risk of sexual HIV infection in heterosexual men. On Tuesday, researchers said it also protected their female partners.



In a study with nearly 10,000 people in SA, women who reported their most recent male sexual partner was circumcised were 22% less likely to have HIV and 15% less likely to have genital herpes than women whose last partner was not.

The reason is not clear. Is it simply that fewer men are being infected and infecting others in turn, or does circumcision actively prevent HIV-positive men from passing on the virus? Research would continue, said

**Safeguards:**

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases says prevention of HIV infection is paramount. /Reuters

Ayesha Kharsany of Caprisa (Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in SA). "What is certain ... is that having a circumcised partner can provide women with partial protection against HIV," she said.

About 12-million men have been medically circumcised in sub-Saharan Africa in an effort to stop the spread of HIV, Kharsany said.

A study of gay couples in which one partner had HIV showed infected men who achieve virus suppression with ART also protected their uninfected partners.

"There were no ... HIV transmissions within these couples," said Andrew Grulich of the University of New South Wales in Australia, who took part in the study, entitled Opposites Attract. Grulich and a team followed 330 couples for about one and a half years, during which time the participants reported 17,000 acts of condomless, anal sex.

The lack of HIV spread was despite high rates of other sexually transmissible infections, the team found. "We think these findings really strongly support the hypothesis that condomless sex, when the viral load is undetectable, is a form of safe sex," said Grulich.

A two-year study of 96 girls aged 15 to 17 in the US showed a vaginal ring treated with the antiretroviral drug dapivirine was safe and easy to wear constantly, replaced monthly. /AFP