



Integrating HIV prevention into a trial

Integrating oral pre-exposure prophylaxis into the HIV prevention package of a trial shows high uptake by South African women at risk of HIV infection.

Dr Ivana Beesham is a PhD student at the University of the Witwatersrand, and her research focuses on oral pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention in clinical trials.



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

MRU MatCH Research Unit
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of the Witwatersrand

Scholarship programme:
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Orcid ID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4889-8123>

Additional information:
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Oral pre-exposure prophylaxis could reduce HIV infections in women.



Women in South Africa are at substantial risk of HIV infection. In 2020 alone, 140 000 women aged 15 and older became infected with HIV in South Africa – almost double the number of men of the same age.

Increased HIV prevention efforts are urgently needed to reduce new HIV infections. One such option is an oral pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. Oral PrEP is a pill that contains antiretroviral drugs that prevents HIV infection if taken daily.

The Evidence for Contraceptive Options and HIV Outcomes (ECHO) Trial that was conducted in several African countries, including South Africa, assessed HIV incidence

among women randomized to one of three highly effective contraceptives. Women were offered oral PrEP as part of the HIV prevention package during the trial.

Dr Ivana Beesham from the University of the Witwatersrand interviewed women from the Durban trial site who had initiated oral PrEP.

“All eligible women remaining in the study follow-up were offered oral PrEP, and almost one in two women who were offered oral PrEP elected to initiate PrEP,” says Beesham. “Women who initiated oral PrEP reported multiple factors that make them feel at risk of acquiring HIV.”

These include having condomless sex, feeling their partner has other sexual partners, not trusting their partner and having been diagnosed with or treated for a sexually transmitted infection.

“It was encouraging to see oral PrEP being successfully integrated into the ECHO Trial and a high uptake of oral PrEP by women who perceived themselves at risk of HIV infection,” says Beesham.

“Given that the number of new HIV infections among South African women remains unacceptably high, we need to act urgently to reduce HIV incidence.”