

PrEP for HIV prevention is not a vaccine, warns health expert

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Volunteers distribute leaflets about HIV/AIDS prevention and condoms along the riverside in Phnom Penh's Daun Penh district in 2021. Post Staff

Reports indicate that Cambodia plans to introduce Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention by early 2025. However, a health expert has clarified that PrEP is not a vaccine but a preventive measure designed to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

Ouk Vichea, director of the National Centre for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STD (NCHADS), explained that while the Ministry of Health intends to introduce an injectable form of PrEP, it is not a cure or vaccine for HIV.

“So far, no vaccine has been developed for AIDS,” he told *The Post*.

“Starting in the first quarter of 2025, under the guidance of [the minister], the health ministry will import and implement PrEP, which involves using injections to prevent HIV infection before exposure,” Vichea said.

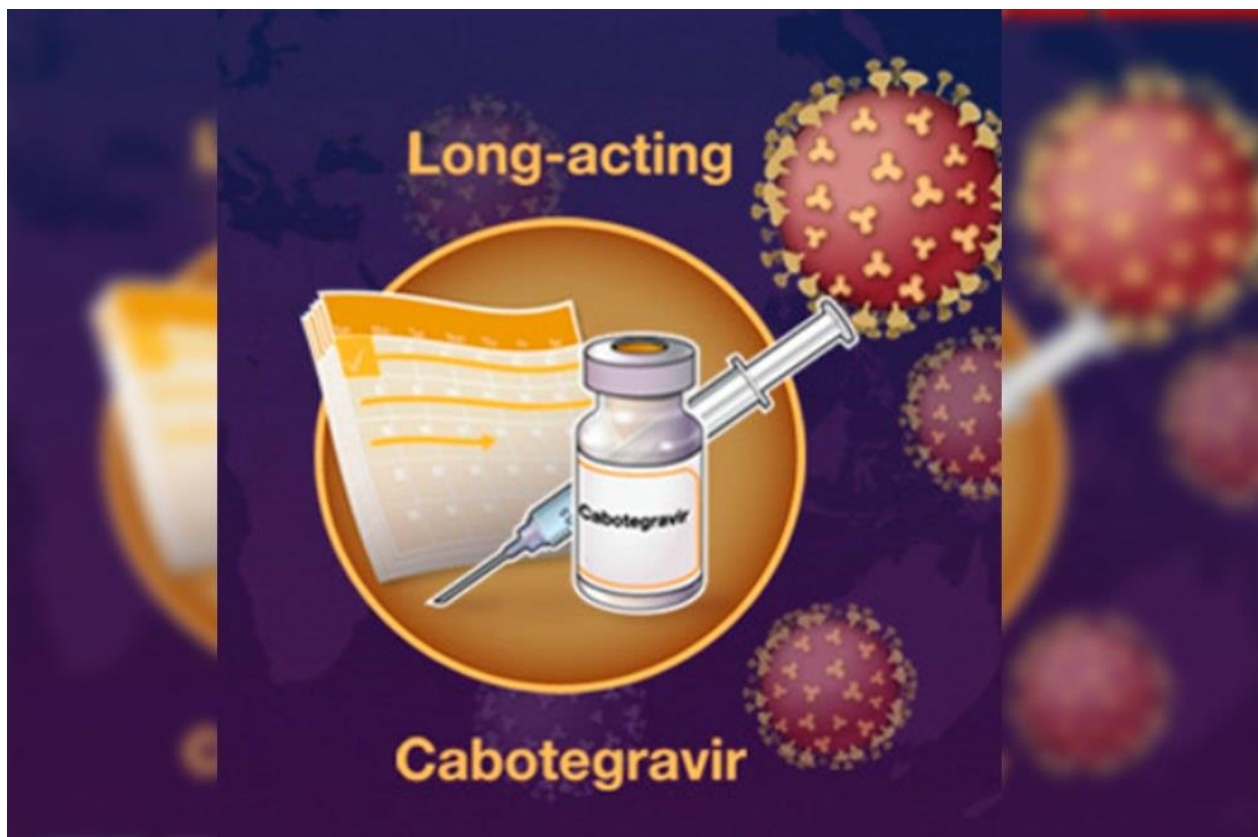
He confirmed that the injectable PrEP, Cabotegravir, is a long-acting drug administered every two months to individuals at high risk of HIV infection. This includes people with

multiple sexual partners, sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender individuals and drug users.

Vichea highlighted that the country has been using oral PrEP for HIV prevention since 2019. The introduction of Cabotegravir provides an additional option for those who may find daily oral medication challenging.

He stressed that while PrEP is effective in preventing HIV infection, it does not protect against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or diseases.

“Currently, there is an outbreak of STIs, including syphilis and gonorrhoea, which require treatment by a qualified doctor rather than self-medication with drugs purchased from pharmacies. Gonorrhoea, in particular, has become resistant to many medications,” he warned.



Cabotegravir extended-release suspension, a long-acting integrase inhibitor for HIV prevention, was approved by the FDA on December 20, 2021. WHO

Vichea emphasised that condoms remain the most effective method for preventing HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancies. He noted that the introduction of oral and injectable PrEP is aimed at providing alternatives for high-risk groups who may not consistently use condoms in certain situations or with specific partners.

“The health ministry is also importing another injectable drug for HIV prevention, but this is not a vaccine,” he added. “For individuals with multiple sexual partners, using condoms remains critical, as neither oral nor injectable PrEP protects against other STIs or diseases.”

Global research shows that condom use alone has not been sufficient to significantly reduce new HIV infections in some populations. Vichea highlighted that Cabotegravir is between 92 and 95 per cent effective in preventing HIV transmission.

“We hope this approach will further reduce new HIV infections in Cambodia,” he told The Post.

Cabotegravir extended-release suspension, a long-acting integrase inhibitor, was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on December 20, 2021, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). The drug is administered as an intramuscular injection every two months by a healthcare worker and is available for adults and adolescents weighing at least 35 kilogrammes to reduce the risk of sexually acquired HIV.

New HIV infections in Cambodia dropped to 1,200 in 2023, down from 1,300 in 2022, according to a joint report released in July by the National AIDS Authority and UNAIDS. The decline is attributed to Cambodia’s strong response to HIV/AIDS, which includes prevention programmes and improved treatment access. Mother-to-child transmission rates also fell from 11 to eight per cent during the same period.

Despite this progress, challenges remain. New infections continue to be reported among high-risk groups. Most new infections are concentrated among young people aged 15-24, reflecting a decline in awareness within this demographic.

UNAIDS estimates that 76,000 people in Cambodia were living with HIV/AIDS in 2023, with 68,151 receiving antiretroviral treatment. However, more than 10,000 individuals were unaware of their HIV-positive status as of 2022. While the country has made significant strides, achieving the 2025 target of fewer than 200 new infections annually remains a considerable challenge.