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People with HIV living longer, study shows

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By Michael Kahn

LONDON (Reuters) - People with HIV in the developed world are no more likely to die in the first five years following infection than men and women in the general population, British researchers said on Tuesday.

The risk for people infected through sex creeps up after that, according to the study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association that highlights the power of AIDS drugs introduced in the mid-1990s.

The findings did not include men and women infected through injected drug use, and their death risk remained higher in the five years after infection, said Kholoud Porter of Britain's Medical Research Council, who led the study.

"This is looking really good that life expectancies are becoming close to the uninfected population," said Porter, an epidemiologist. "It also underscores the importance that people are identified and treated early."

The advent of combination drug therapy in the 1990s called highly active antiretroviral therapy, or HAART, has greatly extended the lives of many HIV-infected people, particularly in developed countries.

There is no cure or vaccine but the drugs, which interfere with HIV at several levels, can keep people healthy for years even if they never eradicate the virus. This means people must take them for life.

Leading manufacturers of AIDS drugs include GlaxoSmithKline, Gilead Sciences Inc, Roche, Pfizer, Merck Inc, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Abbott Laboratories.

The British team compared the death risk in the five years following infection of 13,000 men and women to uninfected people of the same age and gender who were living in the same country at the same time.

Before 1996 when the drug cocktails were not widely available, the heightened death risk ranged from nearly 8 percent to 20 percent depending on age before falling each year to zero in the year 2000 for all age groups, Porter said.

The risk rises again after five years, possibly because people become less likely to take the drugs regularly or maybe because they are less able to tolerate the drugs, Porter said.

"From a practical point of view, people with HIV infections want to know how long they can expect to live for," she said in a telephone interview.

The youngest group -- people aged 15 to 24 when infected -- had a 5 percent higher risk of dying at 10 years following infection and a 7 percent greater risk at 15 years than average healthy people.

For people over 45, the raised risk was 5 percent at 10 years and 12 percent at 15 years, Porter said.

The AIDS virus infects an estimated 33 million people globally, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, and has killed 25 million.

(Reporting by Michael Kahn; Editing by Maggie Fox)

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