

Rape victims can prevent HIV by quick action

In this period of activism over violence against women and children, I would like to offer some advice to women who are victims of rape.

Women who are raped must acknowledge the risk of contracting HIV from their attacker and contact their doctor or the nearest clinic as soon as possible.

The physical trauma of rape means that victims are particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV. The risk is far higher than the danger a doctor faces from a needle-stick injury.

Fortunately, rape victims can now access post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent them from contracting HIV. Time is of the essence at this stage.

Rape is a horrifying experience and the victim has many terrible realities to deal with in the aftermath of the attack. However, it is very important that she think of herself first, acknowledge the potential risk of HIV, see a doctor and take that first tablet.

Although there is a 72-hour window in which victims can take their first "anti-HIV" pill, the reality is that the sooner you start treatment, the better your chances of not contracting the virus.



I advise that rape victims choose the strongest possible course of drugs available in their own defence. It is an all-or-nothing situation. You only get one chance to fight infection.

Patients are given a 28-day course of three drugs – usually Combivir (a combination of AZT and 3TC) and Stocrin. Although the medication can have side-effects, such as severe nausea, patients must continue to take it as prescribed for it to be effective.

One month's discomfort is a small price to pay to protect yourself against a lifelong – and deadly – in-

fection.

As soon as possible after the rape, a doctor will take a blood sample to establish a baseline HIV profile. The patient must then return to the clinic for a blood test to establish an antibody count at six weeks, three months and six months.

A clean bill of health at three months is likely to indicate that she has not contracted HIV. However, a six-month check-up is advised for absolute peace of mind.

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