

AIDS resistance

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Science and Health Editor

CAPE TOWN — Medical testing firm Davies Diagnostics is planning to launch a new HIV test in SA that can identify the small minority of patients who take up to 20 years to develop AIDS.

Without treatment most people infected with HIV will develop AIDS-associated illnesses within three to five years, but so-called "long-term nonprogressors" stay healthy for longer.

The test, developed by French firm Ivagen, enabled doctors to identify patients who can safely delay in taking anti-retroviral medicines, said Davies Diagnostics MD Tony Chaplin.

"The test will also be useful for life insurance companies providing cover to HIV-positive individuals," he said.

The new test detects anti-R7V antibodies, which are present in the blood of long-term nonprogressors.

Scientists believed these antibodies offer protection against the disease, although the exact mechanism is not yet understood, said Dr Alan Smith, chief specialist virologist for KwaZulu-Natal province.

More than 5-million South Africans are infected with HIV, and there are about 500 000 new infections each year, according to the Actuarial Society of SA.

Chaplin said it would cost laboratories about R200 to perform an anti-RV7 test.

President of the Southern Africa HIV Clinicians Society Dr Francois Venter expressed doubts, saying he was unsure what value the test would add to conventional HIV monitoring.