



For Immediate Release

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Contact: Kimberley Lufkin, UCSF Bixby Center, [kimberley.lufkin@ucsf.edu](mailto:kimberley.lufkin@ucsf.edu) or 415- 502-0830

### **New study finds that implants are an effective contraceptive option for HIV-positive women**

**Nairobi, Kenya:** Contraceptive implants are a safe and effective birth control option for HIV-positive women using anti-retroviral therapy (ART), including efavirenz-based ART, according to a new study published today in [The Lancet HIV](#). The study – conducted by researchers at the Kenya Medical Research Institute ([KEMRI](#)) and the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) [Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health](#) – sheds light on ongoing controversies regarding women’s birth control options.

Using data collected at Kenyan HIV care clinics supported by the Bixby Center’s Family AIDS Care & Education Services ([FACES](#)) program and Kenya’s Ministry of Health, the researchers followed nearly 25,000 women for more than two years. They noted the types of contraceptive methods and ART regimens the women reported using. They also tracked when these women became pregnant.

The study found that HIV-positive women who used subdermal implants and efavirenz-based ART had three times higher rates of pregnancy than women who used implants and nevirapine-based ART. However, women who used any other method of contraception, such as the Depo Provera injection or oral contraceptive pills, had 1.6-2.8 times higher rates of pregnancy while receiving efavirenz-based ART. The only exception were women who used intrauterine contraceptive devices or had hysterectomies or tubal ligations.

“In other words, despite having slightly higher rates of pregnancy while using implants and efavirenz-based ART, these women were still likely to have one of the lowest pregnancy rates due to the implant’s overall effectiveness,” reports the paper’s lead author, [Dr. Rena C. Patel](#), assistant professor at the UCSF Division of Infectious Diseases.

In general, implants are the most effective form of reversible contraception and fail less than 1 percent of the time. Implants are routinely placed under the skin by nurses and clinical officers in sub-Saharan Africa, and protect against pregnancy for up to 3 or 5 years. They do not require any maintenance or return to health facilities, so an increasing number of women are choosing this convenient method of family planning.

This is the first study to comprehensively examine this important topic in the field of HIV and reproductive health. Due to data from previous studies, which showed that the implant’s hormone concentrations in blood were reduced when used with efavirenz-based ART, some ministries of health in

sub-Saharan Africa have recommended against the use of implants for women receiving efavirenz-based ART.

“Efavirenz-based ART is the leading combination regimen recommended by the World Health Organization for resource-limited settings,” says Dr. Elizabeth A. Bukusi, deputy director of research and training at KEMRI and co-author on the paper. “Recommending women not use implants while on efavirenz-based ART is problematic, as alternative long-acting but reversible contraception, such as intrauterine contraceptive devices, are not readily available in Kenya.”

“This study demonstrates that while women on efavirenz-based ART using the implant have a slightly increased risk of pregnancy, but that their risk of pregnancy remained extremely low and was lower than the risk of pregnancy using other reversible contraceptive methods. Counseling women who are HIV-positive about family planning options should include this information to help the patient make an informed choice,” says the paper’s senior author, [Dr. Craig R. Cohen](#), UCSF professor at the Bixby Center and co-director of FACES.

While the study has some limitations, it sheds extensive light on this controversy. Future studies are needed to determine if there are ways to optimize the implant, such as shortening the duration of its use, or if implants when used in combination with other ART regimens improve protection against pregnancy. “What this problem really boils down to is providing greater access to newer ART options, which are less likely to interact with hormonal contraception, in resource-limited settings so women can continue to have the choice of using implants,” says Dr. Patel.

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The **UCSF Bixby Center** works to ensure that women, men and adolescents have the power to manage their health, including access to safe and effective birth control, abortion, childbirth, and prevention and care for sexually transmitted infections. Our rigorous research generates evidence that we translate into better health policies and clinical care. For more information about the UCSF Bixby Center, visit [bixbycenter.ucsf.edu](http://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu).

Journalists and editors can contact Kimberley Lufkin, UCSF Bixby Center, [kimberley.lufkin@ucsf.edu](mailto:kimberley.lufkin@ucsf.edu) or 415- 502-0830 to arrange interviews or receive additional information.



UCSF Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health  
3333 California Street, Suite 335, Box 0744, San Francisco, CA 94143  
[bixbycenter@ucsf.edu](mailto:bixbycenter@ucsf.edu) | [bixbycenter.ucsf.edu](http://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu)