

Brazil expands its anti-AIDS program

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(AP) —Brazil's anti-AIDS program will be expanded to include at least 35,000 more people, a Health Ministry official said Wednesday.

Ronaldo Hallal of the ministry's Sexually Transmitted Disease Department said people with 500 or fewer CD4 cells per cubic millimeter will receive anti-retroviral HIV treatment. Before the program's expansion, people with 350 or less CD4 cells per cubic millimeter received treatment.

CD4 cell levels measure the strength of the immune system.

Hallal said recent studies show that the "earlier treatment begins, the better is the quality of life of a person infected with the HIV virus."

"Brazil will be the only large country in the world to offer this kind of treatment that will reduce the risk of opportunistic infections like tuberculosis," Health Minister Alexandre Padilla said in a statement.

The expansion of the program will require spending an additional 120 million reais (\$60,000) a year, the Health Ministry said on its website.

Hallal said Brazil already spends 1.2 billion reais (\$600 million) each year in its free anti-AIDS program that is currently treating 223,000 people. He said he thinks there are 250,000 other Brazilians infected with the HIV virus but are unaware of it.

Brazil started providing free anti-retroviral drugs and condoms in 1996.

To ensure access to cheaper generic medicines to treat the disease, it challenged the patents of major pharmaceutical corporations.

The latest Health Ministry figures available say 241,469 people died of AIDS in Brazil between 1980 and 2010. During the same period, 608,000 AIDS cases were registered.

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