

Strawberry-flavoured child HIV drug slashes cost: Unitaid

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A strawberry-flavoured HIV treatment for the 1.7 million children living with the virus will slash the cost of yearly paediatric drugs by three quarters, Unitaid announced on World AIDS Day.

The dispersible HIV treatment is the first specifically made for children and will initially be available in six African countries in the first half of 2021, the global health development organisation said in a statement.

The new formulation of the recommended first-line HIV treatment dolutegravir (DTG) will be made as a 10-milligramme strawberry-flavoured, dispersible tablet.

"A long-awaited HIV treatment designed specifically for children will now be available in low- and middle-income countries," Unitaid said Tuesday.

"The new pricing agreement with generic manufacturers Viartis and Macleods means a new dispersible formulation of... DTG will be launched at a yearly cost of \$36 per child, reduced from around \$400."

This will bring down the total cost of yearly paediatric HIV treatment by three quarters, from over \$480 per child to under \$120, said Unitaid, which works in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO).

100,000 child deaths annually

Of the 1.7 million children living with HIV, around 100,000 die every year, said Unitaid.

It said that many children living with HIV have a poor response to treatment because they take anti-retroviral medication that is not correctly dosed, bitter to taste, or in tablet format that is difficult for babies to swallow.

An affordable DTG has thus far been unavailable for children weighing under 20 kilogrammes due to a lack of dispersible tablets, which are considered age-appropriate formulations, Unitaid said.

The product will be made initially available in Benin, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe in the first half of 2021, with other countries set to follow.

Meg Doherty, the WHO's global HIV programme director, said there were 26 million people on anti-retroviral therapy worldwide.

She told journalists that out of 127 countries surveyed by the UN health agency, 12 were reporting critically-low stocks of anti-retroviral medicines due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many countries are getting around restrictions relating to the coronavirus crisis by distributing several months' worth of drugs at a time to patients.

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