

# HIV+ hang on for dear life as city runs out of crucial drug

The life-saving antibiotic, essential to protect patients with low immunity from threatening infections, has been off city shelves for a month; Mumbai District Aids Control Society reassures supply should arrive in another week

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RADHIKA Mehra (name changed) has been making rounds of the ART centre at KEM Hospital to procure Septrin for her HIV+ husband. The Sion resident's CD4 count is below 200, and his doctor has directed him to take the medicine to avoid contracting any infection due to low immunity, which can be life-threatening. However, it's been a dry month for the couple with all ART centres in Mumbai facing an acute shortage of the drug.

"For the last one week, I have repeatedly gone to the ART centre at KEM Hospital, but staffers have shooed me away again and again as they don't have stock. I tried to procure it from outside but failed to. The doctor told me there's been a sudden drop in its supply," she said. "My husband is extremely weak; what if he gets an infection? I am scared he might die."

## The lifesaver

Septrin is the brand name for a combination of antibiotics called cotrimoxazole, which is the main drug used to treat and prevent a type of pneumonia called *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) that develops mainly among HIV+ patients due to their low immunity. Those having CD4 count lower than 350 are prescribed the drug to protect them from any life-threatening infection. Earlier, only patients with CD4 count below 200 were given the medicine.



Septrin is the main drug used to treat and prevent a type of pneumonia that develops mainly among HIV+ patients

"PCP is potentially fatal and used to be the most common cause of death among the HIV+. Septrin is the most effective protection against it. It also reduces the risk of toxoplasmosis, an infection that can affect the brain," said Dr Harshad Limaye, consulting physician and HIV expert, Nanavati Hospital.

He added that a few of his patients too had complained about the medicine's unavailability in the market. "I don't know the exact reason behind the shortage. Due to its less demand, supply too is usually limited."

## New order placed

Dr Srikala Acharya, director of Mumbai District Aids Control Society, said the stock got over just last week, and they have already placed an order for more. "We had placed the order last week itself, but it wasn't delivered. It should arrive in another week," she added.

# 350

Minimum CD4 count HIV patients must have to not need the drug

# 200

The minimum CD4 count required earlier