

Aids researcher gives go-ahead to confident kissing

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KISSING, once included in the list of unsafe sexual practices, has been given the all-clear. You cannot catch Aids by kissing because a protein in saliva protects the white blood cell from infection, according to Dr Tessie McNeely, of the US National Institute of Dental Research.

Her studies confirm the experience of the past decade, which shows that it is extremely difficult to catch Aids by kissing, even of the most passionate kind. The protein, secre-

tory leukocyte protease inhibitor, attaches itself to the white blood cells and protects them from infection. Dr McNeely told a meeting of the American Society for Microbiology yesterday. Researchers have known for a long time that it is difficult to find any evidence of HIV in the saliva of people who are infected, and transmission of HIV through kissing remains unproven.

"That's why we were prompted to look for the physiological reason," Dr McNeely said. Just how the protein protects against HIV remains unclear, and there may be

other substances in saliva that also contribute. Among these are proteins called mucins, which Dr Earl J. Bergey, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, has shown can help by causing HIV to clump together. But even when many of these are removed, saliva still protects cells from HIV.

Dr McNeely tested a variety of saliva proteins to see which ones kept HIV from infecting blood cells. Only one seemed to work at the concentrations usually found in saliva. The protein is made by cells in the mucous membranes. Its

functions, among other things, are thought to be protecting against the body's protein-destroying enzymes.

Meanwhile, Aids has surpassed accidents as the biggest killer of young adults in America, according to figures released yesterday.

In 1993, HIV infection became the biggest cause of death among Americans aged 25 to 44. Dr Harold Jaffe, of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, said that more than 441,000 Americans have developed Aids since 1981, and more than 250,000 have died. The finding could lead to new

therapies. Dr McNeely said that it might be possible to inject the protein into the bloodstream, keeping HIV from blood cells. The protein already circulates in the blood, but at extremely low levels.

Health officials estimate that more than ten million adults and about a million children have been infected with HIV around the world.

American adults died from Aids, while about 32 died from accidents, followed by cancer, heart disease, suicide and murder. Dr Jaffe said that Aids is the biggest killer of young adults in 79 US cities.

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