

Merck HIV drug strategy seen shielding patent

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MUMBAI: Merck is set to sell an HIV medication in India by mid-year in partnership with local company Cipla (CIPLA), a strategy that may help the US drug-maker protect its patent as the Asian nation seeks cheaper generics.

The price of the co-marketed product will be announced in about three months, according to Cipla's chief medical officer Jaideep Gogtay. The therapy, sold under the brand Isentress, is among more than 20 that an Indian government panel was preparing to assess for compulsory licenses, which allow cheaper local copies without the patent owner's consent.

"There's always a cost element to any lifelong treatments, but there's also the need for the right patients to get it at the right time," Gogtay said in a telephone interview from Mumbai. Cipla, the third-biggest supplier of drugs in India by market share, offers Merck extensive distribution, he said.

Emerging markets have become increasingly challenging for global drugmakers as nations from India to China seek wider access to treatments, prompting companies to explore ways of lowering prices. Merck's deal with Cipla will involve selling Isentress at a more affordable level, according to IIFL Institutional Equities. The cost in India needs to be no more than a 10th of the \$5,000 a year paid per patient in richer countries, Doctors Without Borders said.

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