

**UNITE FOR CHILDREN  
UNITE AGAINST AIDS** 

## HIV/AIDS: PMTCT Plus

### Prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV

In 2005 about 540,000 children under the age of 15 were infected with HIV. Most children are infected via transmission during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding. Without preventive interventions, about 26 per cent of babies born to mothers living with HIV will acquire the virus.

In rich countries, due to the use of anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs), combined with elective caesarean delivery and avoidance of all breastfeeding, new infections in babies have been



A Thai woman in the advanced stages of HIV infection, holds her 16-month-old baby daughter.

Credit: UNICEF/HQ97-0233/Jeremy Horner

reduced to almost zero. Unfortunately, this is not the case in developing countries. In nations such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia, mortality rates attributable to HIV infection among children under the age of five have exceeded 30 per 1,000 live births.

Simple regimens such as those based on the anti-retroviral drugs Zidovudine (ZDV, AZT) or Nevirapine (NVP) have achieved reductions in mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of up to 50 per cent in developing countries, but the availability of these drugs remains low. Unless coverage increases significantly, more than half of all newly infected infants will continue to die before the age of two.

### Pilot projects and progress

In 1998, when it became known that mother-to-child transmission could be prevented using simple interventions of proven efficacy, ZDV and safe infant-feeding practices for example, UNICEF initiated the first pilot projects to demonstrate the feasibility of integrating PMTCT programmes into maternal child services in 11 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. The strategies for PMTCT involve more than just anti-retroviral treatment (ART). The first step is

### Breastfeeding and HIV

Breast milk contains anti-bodies that protect against diarrhoea and respiratory infections – the two leading killers of babies worldwide. A baby under two months old who is not breastfed is six times more likely to die. Newborns also risk HIV infection through breastfeeding. This risk must however be balanced against the increased risk of infection and death when infants are not breastfed. Drug therapy during pregnancy and birth, planned Caesarean sections and safe replacement feeding, can reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission to less than 2 per cent.

Mothers living with HIV/AIDS are advised to avoid breastfeeding when replacement feeding – for example, breastfeeding by another HIV-negative woman, heat treating a mother's own expressed breast milk, or preparation of infant formula – is acceptable, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe.

Mixed feeding – where breast milk is given with tea, water or cereals – may cause inflammation in the infant's digestive tract causing HIV in breast milk to pass directly into the blood stream. On the other hand, breast milk is easily digestible and contains an immunoglobulin called secretory IgA that helps protect against HIV.

Therefore UNICEF recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first few months.

# Information Sheet

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### Maltati and PMTCT

Maltati, a 25-year-old mother of two, found out she was HIV-positive when, seven months pregnant with her second child, she went to the hospital in Guntur, south-eastern India.

Maltati didn't know what HIV or AIDS was. When a female counsellor at the Guntur General Hospital explained the facts to her, Maltati felt depressed and angry. "But then she told me that I could have a healthy baby, and I felt better."

For Maltati, the process involved more counselling sessions, one tablet of Nevirapine (NVP) during delivery, and postnatal visits to hospital. For Kisan, her newborn son, it meant an oral dose of NVP shortly after birth, and a blood test to check for HIV infection after 18 months.

Maltati dutifully followed the advice. At the age of 18 months, Kisan was tested for HIV: the result was negative.

The hospital where Maltati gave birth is one of 37 in Andhra Pradesh to offer the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV, a programme supported by UNICEF.

Currently, there are about 300 facilities across India providing PMTCT services. The goal is to expand that to 780 by December 2005. UNICEF, in partnership with individual state National AIDS Control Societies, funds the training of medical teams on all aspects of HIV and AIDS, and provides the NVP given to mother and baby.

the prevention of infection in women of childbearing age, coupled with prevention of unintended pregnancy in HIV-positive women. Other strategies to prevent the virus passing from mother to child include safe-delivery practices and advice on infant feeding.

Substantial progress has been made. UNICEF, UNAIDS, WHO, Columbia University, Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF) and others have gained a wealth of experience during the six years of supporting the implementation of PMTCT programmes. Considerable global awareness has been achieved and national governments' leadership has significantly improved. More than 100 countries worldwide are implementing programmes, of which 13 have achieved national coverage. UNICEF is directly supporting 79 countries with PMTCT provision.

UNICEF's initial priority was to demonstrate the feasibility and acceptability of PMTCT programmes in settings with limited resources. To achieve that, UNICEF established and directly supported selected implementation sites throughout the piloting phase. By the end of 2004, 48 UNICEF-supported countries had expanded beyond pilot sites.

More remains to be done. The level of support differs markedly from one region to another, and increases in coverage and resources have been very slow. As a result, the percentage of pregnant women living with HIV and benefiting from PMTCT programmes is less than 10 per cent in developing countries.

### The "Plus" in "PMTCT Plus"

Care for mothers also needs to extend beyond the interventions that prevent their baby from contracting HIV. It is for this reason that UNICEF is committed to a

### The Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS Campaign

By 2010, as part of its global Campaign, UNICEF will reach 2.3 million women through its "PMTCT Plus" programme. This expansion of the PMTCT Plus programme will prevent 1 million new infections in children. The estimated cost of the programme is US\$1.5 billion annually until 2010.

major acceleration of "PMTCT Plus" programmes, where the "Plus" represents treatment for parents and other members of the family. Women living with HIV/AIDS who have recently given birth are the initial contact. Then the child from that pregnancy, other children in the family and the male partner are also enrolled in the PMTCT Plus programme. In this way, the entire family is engaged at an early stage in support services that can help keep them healthy.

The PMTCT Plus package is a comprehensive model of care that offers treatment with anti-retroviral drugs to those in need, but also encompasses family planning and reproductive health services, nutritional support, counselling and supportive care, and treatment of other diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. It is important that PMTCT Plus programmes are linked to the formal health service to ensure that a comprehensive model of care is delivered through a single, national, coordinated provider.

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