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Mothers, Children Face Dual Challenges

Despite advancements in medicine, pregnancy can still be risky.

Especially in poor countries where medical help isn't readily available, most women deliver babies outside healthcare facilities.

But pregnant women who are HIV-positive worry about much more than their health or their pregnancy. They worry about people finding out they have HIV. They worry about transmitting the HIV virus to their unborn child. They worry about stigma, discrimination and rejection from their families and society. As a result, many avoid using existing health resources.

Once the infants are born, these mothers worry about how to feed them. If they don't breastfeed, society assumes they are HIV-positive. But if they do, society accuses them of killing the babies. So many women just pretend to or continue breastfeeding.

In developing countries where HIV/AIDS prevalence is very high, less than 40% of women actually deliver in health facilities.

Probability for transmission from mother to infant is high:

- 5–10% during pregnancy
- 10–20% during labor and delivery
- 5–20% through breastfeeding

More than 90% percent children under 15 who are HIV-positive become infected through mother to child transmission.

Antiretroviral Drugs Can Help Stem Mother to Child Transmission

Antiretroviral drugs are widely used to slow down the spread of the HIV virus. This allows infected people to live healthier lives.

Recent research shows that these drugs also can help prevent mother to child transmission.

Just a single dose of an antiretroviral can reduce the incidence of HIV

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THINK ABOUT IT

Relating to Those with HIV

People still need to learn a lot about HIV/AIDS and how to relate to those who are HIV-positive, even health care providers. "There is an almost hysterical kind of fear—at all levels—starting from the humblest, the sweeper, the ward maid, up to the heads of departments, which makes them scared of having to deal with an HIV-positive patient. Whenever they have an HIV patient, the responses are shameful," says a retired doctor from a public hospital in India.

Formula vs. Breast Milk for HIV-positive Babies

So why not use the formula to feed the baby and avoid breast

transmission during pregnancy or delivery. Also, an HIV-infected mother may breastfeed without infecting her infant if the baby gets the medicine while nursing.

But few people in Africa have access to these drugs. [The World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) has declared access to antiretroviral drugs a global health emergency.

Of some 26 million people living with HIV in Africa, an estimated 4 million have advanced to the stage where the drugs are necessary to forestall the onset of AIDS. Yet, only 100,000 have access to treatment.

milk? It's not that simple. Formula must be mixed with water. In many places it's difficult to get clean water. If babies drink polluted water, they can get diarrhea or other waterborne diseases, which can be deadly.

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What Is the World Bank Doing?

The World Bank is the largest investor in combating HIV/AIDS in developing countries. It has invested US\$2 billion since 1986. The Bank launched a Multi-Country HIV/AIDS Program (MAP) in September 2000 that has set aside US\$1 billion to fund projects, including many on-going projects in more than 25 sub-Saharan African countries.