

SOUTH AFRICA: Women becoming HIV-positive during pregnancy - study



Photo: Tiggy Ridley/IRIN 

Only 40 percent of women used a condom during pregnancy

JOHANNESBURG, 24 June 2009 (PlusNews) - A large number of South African women are being infected with HIV during pregnancy but not diagnosed, according to a new study published in the latest issue of *AIDS*, the official journal of the International AIDS Society.

The findings of a South African study published in the 19 June edition of *AIDS* found that 3 percent of women who had a negative HIV test result when first accessing antenatal services later tested positive.

Although national guidelines state that all women should be offered voluntary HIV testing and counselling when they first access [antenatal services](#), repeat testing of women

with a negative result is rarely offered.

During the study, researchers offered a repeat HIV test at clinics in Eastern Cape and Free State provinces between July 2006 and April 2007. A total of 5,233 pregnant women had registered for antenatal care and almost 80 percent accepted an HIV test; prevalence was 28 percent.

The women who initially tested negative were then referred for a repeat HIV test between weeks 36 and 40 of pregnancy. About 53 percent had such a test and 3 percent were found to be HIV-positive.

New HIV infections were twice as high in women aged 25 to 29 and 30 to 40 than among those aged below 20. There were also fewer new infections among women with tertiary education than those with lower levels.

Researchers noted that HIV testing done at the first visit may miss women who have recently become infected. Significantly, only 40 percent of women used a condom during pregnancy. "Public health programs need to continue to reinforce prevention strategies and HIV retesting during pregnancy," the authors noted.

"[Retesting] also offers an additional opportunity to prevent mother-to-child transmission and further horizontal transmission. Further research is required to understand the cause of primary HIV infection in pregnancy."

kn/he