

Headline **HIV-exposed infants born with fewer antibodies**
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HIV-exposed infants born with fewer antibodies

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Christine Jones, clinical researcher

INFANTS with prenatal exposure to HIV are born with fewer antibodies to fight diseases such as hepatitis B and whooping cough, according to a study in South Africa that doctors say could lead to expansion of vaccination programs to include HIV-infected pregnant women.

Of infants exposed to HIV before birth without becoming infected themselves, 17 per cent had antibody levels thought to protect against Haemophilus influenza type B, or HiB, compared with 52 per cent of infants without exposure, researchers said last week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Twenty-one percent of those exposed had antibodies against hepatitis B compared with 54 per cent of unexposed babies.

The study confirms what doctors had already thought: that babies exposed prenatally to HIV are born

with less protection against infections, said Michael Brady, chairman of the Department of Paediatric at National Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, who wasn't involved in the research.

"Maybe we should start developing a vaccine programme for HIV-infected women to make sure that infants have the best opportunities to get mom's antibodies at high levels," Brady said in a telephone interview on Thursday. Brady is also chairman of the committee on infectious diseases for the American Academy of Paediatrics, based in Elk Grove Village, Ill.

Women with HIV have lower antibody levels to some infections and transfer less protection to their babies, said Christine Jones, the lead author of the study.

The research shows why infants who were exposed to

HIV without catching that virus might be vulnerable to other infections, Jones, a clinical research fellow in paediatrics at Imperial College London, said in an e-mail Monday. The pattern changed after vaccination, she said.

"Once the HIV-exposed, uninfected babies received their routine vaccinations, they had antibody levels similar to, or higher than, HIV unexposed infants, meaning that they were

likely to be well protected by vaccination," Jones said.

More research is needed to establish whether babies exposed prenatally to HIV could be better protected against infections through earlier vaccination, or through vaccine shots given to mothers before the children are born, the researcher said.

Before vaccine recommendations can change, more studies are also needed to show that

boosting antibody levels in these babies actually prevents them from developing these diseases, Jones said.

Makers of vaccines include New York-based Pfizer, Paris-based Sanofi-Aventis, London-based GlaxoSmithKline and Punjab, India-based Panacea Biotec.

In the study, researchers from Imperial College London and Stellenbosch University in Stellenbosch, South Africa, included 109 mothers who were either HIV infected or uninfected. The scientists measured antibody levels in the mothers at delivery and in the babies at birth. The researchers also looked at how the infants responded to vaccinations four months

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after they had received the vaccines.

The study showed that HIV-exposed infants who weren't infected with the disease had lower levels of antibodies to whooping cough, tetanus, and pneumococcus or bacterial pneumonia. HIV-positive mothers had lower levels of antibodies to HiB and pneumococcus, and not to whooping cough or tetanus, the researchers found. HiB can cause meningitis and pneumonia.

Bruce Hirsch, an attending physician at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, New York, said while vaccinations may help, the priority should be getting women's HIV under control.

— WP-Bloomberg



VACINATIONS MAY HELP: Caring for HIV baby in Africa.