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## S. African school kids to be tested for HIV

**JOHANNESBURG:** South African children as young as 12 will from next month be able to test for HIV at school in a new plan to curb the virus that has been met with mixed feelings.

The government says the campaign will allow early treatment in a country with the world's highest AIDS infection rate but some activists fear it will pressurise children to test, once the campaign is rolled out in March.

"It must be approached with a great deal of caution. The push to curb the spread of HIV must not infringe on children's right to privacy," Joanne van Niekerk, the director of Childline, said.

"Having testing facilities in schools may also result in undue pressure from parents to get their children tested."

South Africa battles a high teenage pregnancy rate, with one school reporting at least 50 pregnancies this year, with pictures of heavily pregnant school girls in uniforms

often splashed across media.

The voluntary HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) initiative has been hailed by Lovelife, a government funded HIV prevention project aimed at teenagers, who believe that early testing will increase AIDS awareness.

"Children are already having sex at a very young age and the large number of teenage pregnancies shows that they are not using protection," said Scott Burnett, the organisation's Youth Programmes director.

He said different surveys had indicated that children in South Africa started having sex at around 13-14 years of age.

"If we are serious about fighting HIV, it is important that everyone stands up and be tested."

The coastal provinces of KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape which have the highest HIV infections in the country are likely to be the first to beneficiaries of the programme.

— AFP