



Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT)

Q1. What is Mother to Child Transmission (MTCT)?

MTCT happens when HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is passed from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, during birth or during breastfeeding.

Without treatment, around 15-30 per cent of babies born to HIV positive women will become infected with HIV during pregnancy and delivery. A further 5-20 per cent will become infected through breastfeeding.ⁱ

Q2. Is MTCT a major problem?

In 2007, approximately 400,000 children under 15 became infected with HIV, mainly through mother-to-child transmission. About 90 per cent of these MTCT infections occurred in Africa where AIDS is beginning to reverse decades of steady progress in child survival.

In high-income countries MTCT has been virtually eliminated thanks to effective voluntary testing and counseling, access to antiretroviral therapy, safe delivery practices, and the widespread availability and safe use of breast-milk substitutes. If these interventions were used worldwide, they could save the lives of thousands of children each year^{ii iii}

Q3. Can MTCT be prevented?

Yes, it can. The transmission of HIV from mothers to their babies can be stopped. The programme of care to prevent mother to child transmission is often referred to as Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT). PMTCT strategies include:

- Preventing HIV infection among prospective parents
- Avoiding unwanted pregnancies among HIV positive women
- Preventing the transmission of HIV from HIV positive mothers to their infants during pregnancy, labour, delivery and breastfeeding.

The last of these can be achieved by the use of antiretroviral drugs, safer infant feeding practices and other interventions.

Simple measures, such as those based on the anti-retroviral drugs Zidovudine or Nevirapine, have achieved reductions in the mother-to-child transmission of HIV of up to 50 per cent in developing countries, yet still only 10 per cent of women have access to them. These drugs cost as little as \$3.50.

This is, however, the minimum which we should be providing to mothers and children. With medicine and appropriate health care, more than 98 per cent of pregnant women with HIV do not pass the virus on to their babies. Children deserve this chance of life.

UNICEF is campaigning to increase the availability of a programme called PMTCT-plus

- PMTCT-plus is the provision of medicine to the baby of a mother with HIV at birth, to protect him/her against HIV infection.
- PMTCT-plus is also ensuring the mother receives anti-retroviral medicine, not only to prevent the transmission of HIV to her baby, but to protect her health so she is kept alive and able to nurture, care for and protect her child.
- PMTCT-plus is, in addition, introducing measures which protect the whole family's well-being: providing anti-retroviral medicine to dads with HIV; giving advice about the benefits of breastfeeding to mums; giving advice about other diseases, nutrition and sanitation. This way, health workers can use contact with the mother as a way of increasing the family's chances of staying healthy, at times despite HIV.

Q4. Why are so many pregnant women not receiving the help they need?

Most often it is because PMTCT services are unavailable or inefficient, or because women are unable to access them. Stigma and fear may also play a role by making a woman unwilling to take an HIV test, or unwilling to take PMTCT drugs. These problems, though challenging, can be overcome. Some developing countries, such as Botswana and Brazil, are already providing PMTCT services to most of their pregnant women.

Q5. Can't children with HIV be treated with antiretroviral drugs to stop them developing AIDS?

Treatment for children is possible, and some children are being treated with great success. But paediatric treatment is costly and often difficult to administer in resource-poor settings. Preventing a child from becoming infected in the first place is always a better solution.

Sources:

http://www.unicef.org/aids/files/PMTCT_enWEBNov26.pdf

http://www.unicef.org.uk/campaigns/campaign_sub_pages.asp?page=67

<http://www.uniteforchildren.org/index.html>

<http://www.avert.org/motherchild.htm>

ⁱ [Prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission in resource-poor countries: translating research into policy and practice](#), De Cock et al, JAMA 283(9), March 2000

ⁱⁱ [AIDS epidemic update](#), UNAIDS/WHO, December 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ [Questions & Answers II - Basic facts about the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact](#), UNAIDS/WHO, June 2005

