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April 2010

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## Voluntary Antenatal HIV testing in Ireland: Results of the screening programme, 2002 to 2008

A recent report published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) shows that the prevalence of HIV infection among women who availed of antenatal screening between 2002 and 2008 ranged between 2.0 and 3.3 per 1,000 women tested. The prevalence rates have remained stable at 2.0 per 1,000 women tested in 2007 and 2008 which is a decrease from the rates seen in 2002 and 2003 which were 3.2 and 3.3 per 1000 respectively. In Europe, the prevalence of HIV among pregnant women remains low, and during the period 2000 to 2004, no country reported to EuroHIV a national prevalence among pregnant women of greater than 5 per 1000 tested.<sup>1</sup> In this period, the highest national prevalence of HIV in countries reporting data to EuroHIV was 4.8 in Estonia (2002), 3.4 in Ukraine (2004) and 3.1 in Ireland (2003).<sup>1</sup> In the other 20 countries reporting to EuroHIV, HIV prevalence was consistently less than 3.0 per 1000 tests.

Among women giving birth in hospitals in HSE East, the prevalence was greater than 4.0 per 1000 tested between 2002 and 2005 but dropped to 3.3, 3.1 and 2.5 in 2006, 2007 and 2008 respectively. Among women giving birth in hospitals outside of HSE East, the prevalence is lower and ranged between 0.9 and 2.4 per 1000 between 2002 and 2008. In 2008, the rate varied between HSE areas from 0.9 to 2.5 per 1000 women tested. Prevalence of infection varied greatly between different hospitals and in 2008 the prevalence ranged from 0.0 to 3.6 per 1000 women tested.

A HIV infected mother can transmit the virus to her baby during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding. It has been clearly shown that the risk of mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of the virus can be dramatically reduced by treatment of the mother, management of the delivery and avoidance of breastfeeding. The combined effect of these interventions is reported in some studies to reduce the transmission risk from 15-30% to 2% or less.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> However, measures to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to child can only be offered if HIV infection is diagnosed prior to delivery. Between 2002 and 2008, 874 antenatal screening tests were HIV positive. Of the 874 women identified as HIV positive, 392 were not previously known to be HIV positive. The annual number of HIV positive cases identified through antenatal screening has decreased from 157 in 2002 to 122 in 2008. Since 2005, the number of HIV positive cases has been stable between 115 and 125 cases. The number of newly diagnosed HIV cases (i.e. not previously known) has decreased by 70% from 112 in 2002 to 33 in 2008. The number of new positives has remained stable since 2004 (between 33 and 43 new cases per year).

As some hospitals were unable to provide data and other hospitals were unable to provide data on private patients, information on the uptake of antenatal screening is not available for all pregnant women. Despite these limitations, the data within the report highlight the effectiveness of the antenatal HIV screening programme in Ireland, with uptake rates between 94.5% and 99.9%. In 2008, four maternity hospitals (out of 20) were unable to provide data on their antenatal HIV screening programs.

It is of vital importance to continue to identify pregnant women who are HIV positive to ensure they can avail of appropriate treatment and care, to decrease the risk of MCTC HIV and to help prevent transmission of HIV to sexual partners of pregnant women.

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Voluntary antenatal HIV testing in Ireland was introduced in April 1999 by the Department of Health and Children, on the advice of the National AIDS Strategy Committee (NASC). As part of this programme, it is recommended that HIV testing be offered to all women who attend for antenatal services.

The full report can be viewed [here](#)

**Results: 2002 to 2008**

Table 1 describes the data collected from maternity hospitals between 2002 and 2008.

**Table 1: Results of the antenatal screening programme, 2002-2008**

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Number of hospitals participating	21	21	21	20	19	19	16
Number of live births per year <sup>1</sup>	60,503	61,517	61,684	61,042	64,237	70,620	na
Number offered test	51,777	45,259	41,929	44,874	52,434	60,111	62,242
Number accepted test	48,922	43,815	41,929	44,292	51,649	59,521	62,191
Uptake of HIV antenatal test (%)	94.5	96.8	97.7	98.7	98.5	99.1	99.9
Number HIV positive	157	144	103	118	113	117	122
Number new HIV positive (not previously diagnosed)	112	93	39	43	34	38	33
HIV prevalence among pregnant women (per 1000 women tested)	3.2	3.3	2.5	2.7	2.2	2.0	2.0
HIV prevalence - East	4.3	4.3	5.1	4.6	3.3	3.1	2.5
HIV prevalence - non East	2.0	2.4	1.3	1.2	0.9	0.9	1.4

Note: Data are incomplete as some hospitals were unable to provide data and other hospitals were unable to provide data on all patients, in particular data relating to private patients.

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**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank staff in the maternity hospital/units for all the effort involved in providing the data included in this report. We would also like to acknowledge the help of the Departments of Public Health in the Northwest and laboratory staff in Waterford Regional Hospital in collating their regional data.

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