

Rural mothers-to-be in China lack syphilis testing

November 2 2011, By GILLIAN WONG , Associated Press

(AP) -- Nearly half of pregnant women do not get tested for syphilis in poor areas of southern China where the sexually transmitted disease has seen a resurgence, researchers said Wednesday.

A study published in a [World Health Organization](#) journal found that more than 40 percent of about 125,000 mothers-to-be in Guangdong province were not tested for syphilis in 2008, mostly due to a lack of health facilities in rural areas.

"At the moment, the lack of screening is also related to the mothers' lack of awareness about the need to go and get tested, or that the screening service exists," said Chen Xiangsheng, deputy director of China's National Center for Sexually Transmitted Disease Control in Nanjing.

"If a mother has been infected with syphilis, it can be found through the screening at an early stage and treated to prevent the baby from being infected too," said Chen, who is one of the study's researchers, in an interview.

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that is easy to cure but can ravage the mind and kill if untreated. Pregnant women with syphilis can miscarry or the babies can be stillborn or have [congenital defects](#) such as blindness and [brain damage](#).

It was virtually eradicated in China before resurfacing in the 1980s, and cases are now growing by 30 percent a year. Prostitutes along with gay

and [bisexual men](#), many of whom are married, are driving the epidemic.

In China's poor rural areas, syphilis [screening rates](#) range. As few as one-tenth of pregnant women were tested at community health stations, which are sometimes the only facilities that provide prenatal care in very [poor areas](#), the study said.

The study's findings point to the need to expand the use of 15-minute rapid syphilis tests that do not require laboratories or equipment, just blood from a finger prick, said Professor Rosanna Peeling, an expert in diagnostic tests at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

In that way, women who test positive can be treated on the same day, said Peeling, also one of the study's authors, who previously worked for the WHO. "If you are in a rural situation and you have to walk ten miles to a clinic, you're not going to come back (for treatment), especially if you don't feel bad and you have no symptoms," she said.

Since the research was conducted in 2008, several provincial and national programs to improve testing have been put in place, the study said.

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