

Controversial Down's syndrome testing gets Swiss go-ahead

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Switzerland has given the green light for a new prenatal test for Down's syndrome amid controversy over whether this will lead to more abortions, a Swiss newspaper reported Sunday.

Testing will be available in the country from mid-August following a decision by Swissmedic, the national agency for therapeutic products, the Neue Zuercher Zeitung am Sonntag reported.

The test, developed by life sciences company LifeCodexx, involves screening pregnant women's blood samples for the presence of foetal Down's syndrome, which is also known as trisomy 21.

The German-based firm described the procedure, marketed as PrenaTest, as a "risk-free alternative to common invasive examination methods such as amniocentesis".

Demand is high in Switzerland from doctors and expectant mothers, the company said. The test will also be marketed in Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, according to the German-based firm's website.

The Swiss national health insurer Santesuisse and the Swiss gynaecological society are happy for the cost of the test to be reimbursed as part of standard medical cover if it proves successful, the NZZ report said.

But the international federation of Down's syndrome organisations has

objected to such testing at the European Court of Human Rights.

The federation, grouping 30 associations in 16 countries, said in June that the Strasbourg court should "recognise the human condition and protect the right to life of people with Down's syndrome and those handicapped".

Down's syndrome is caused by having an extra copy of chromosome 21 and the risk increases as a woman gets older.

Invasive procedures currently used for prenatal diagnosis -- in the 16th week of pregnancy -- pose a one percent risk of foetal loss. The diagnosis is therefore only made available to high risk women, which fails to catch all cases.

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