

Churches a good place for HIV testing, treatment in africa

October 14 2015



Study found pregnant women in sub-Saharan nations were 11 times more likely to get help in faith-based centers.

(HealthDay)—Churches and other faith-based centers are good locations to offer HIV testing and treatment for pregnant women in isolated areas of sub-Saharan Africa, a new study shows.

Worldwide, about 87 percent of [pregnant women](#) with HIV and more than 90 percent of children with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNAIDS, a United Nations health care program that targets HIV and AIDS.

Researchers found that pregnant women in hard-to-reach and rural areas of Nigeria who were offered prenatal screening for diseases such as HIV, malaria and syphilis at a monthly church-run baby shower (part of a program called the Healthy Beginning Initiative) were 11 times more

likely to get tested for HIV than those who were encouraged to get routine HIV testing at local health facilities.

The study was published Oct. 14 in the *The Lancet Global Health*.

Even though simple, inexpensive and highly effective treatments to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV are becoming more available, one-third of HIV-infected women do not start treatment during pregnancy, resulting in about 210,000 new HIV infections in children every year worldwide.

Poor access to HIV screening is one reason for that, according to the researchers.

"Most pregnant women in sub-Saharan Africa access HIV screening through the health care system. But in many countries like Nigeria, only a third of deliveries take place in hospitals and less than 3 percent of [health care](#) facilities have established services for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission," said study author Dr. Echezona Ezeanolue, an associate professor in the School of Medicine and Community Health Sciences at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

"We have been looking for new ways to reach out and offer sustainable community-based testing programs to pregnant women, to eliminate new HIV infections among children," he said in a journal news release.

The researchers focused on churches because faith-based groups are highly influential in Africa.

"Most communities in sub-Saharan Africa have at least one religious center, even when there are no accessible health facilities. Our findings show that simple, culturally adapted, faith-based programs such as the Healthy Beginning Initiative can effectively increase the uptake of HIV

testing among pregnant women in resource-limited settings," Ezeanolue said.

In a related commentary, Dr. Benjamin Chi and Dr. Elizabeth Stringer, from the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, said the study "provides an evidence-based blueprint for how churches and health clinics can collaborate to produce measurable programmatic benefits. By extending such strategies from HIV testing to long-term adherence and retention, these programs can further deliver on their promise and meaningfully contribute to the elimination of pediatric HIV in the region."

More information: The New Mexico AIDS Education and Training Center has more about [pregnancy and HIV](#).

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Citation: Churches a good place for HIV testing, treatment in africa (2015, October 14) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-10-churches-good-hiv-treatment-africa.html>

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