

Matte Story # 1

HIV Testing Available Through Routine Prenatal Screening

Ask a pregnant woman or a new mother how she felt when she first learned she was pregnant and the majority will answer “excited,” “thrilled,” “over-the-moon.” But hidden beneath this euphoria is often a real sense of nervousness. Most expectant moms worry about what the next nine months will bring and whether their child will be healthy.

Fortunately, pregnant women in Ontario have access to some of the best prenatal care in the world. It is standard practice for pregnant women to visit their prenatal care provider once a month for the first 28 to 32 weeks, biweekly until 36 weeks and weekly after that. Good prenatal care can have a great impact on the mother and her growing baby and these regular medical visits can help to identify potential problems so treatment can be started as soon as necessary and her baby can be born as healthy as possible.

During the first prenatal visit, the healthcare provider will suggest a series of routine blood tests, including screening for hepatitis B, syphilis, rubella and HIV. These tests have not always been available to women, but fortunately now, these four simple blood tests can make the difference between the birth of a very sick baby and a healthy one.

“Ontario recommends that voluntary HIV screening be offered to all pregnant women,” says Dr. Stan Read, Chief, Infectious Diseases, Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “This is a tremendous advantage because if treated, the risk of transmission of HIV from an infected mother to her child can be reduced to only one to two per cent. Without treatment, the risk of transmission is 30 per cent.”

In 1998, Ontario started offering routine HIV screening to all pregnant women and to those thinking about becoming pregnant – regardless of risk. The HIV test can be done at the same time as other routine prenatal tests, or if a woman prefers, she can be tested at one of Ontario’s 33 anonymous HIV testing sites where identifying information is not collected and comprehensive, confidential counselling is guaranteed.

Unfortunately, despite the screening program, 20 per cent of pregnant women in Ontario are still not being tested for the disease. As a result HIV-positive infants continue to be born in the province.

“Some women are not taking the test because they think they are not at risk. Others may not be aware of the test if they are not offered the test by their healthcare providers,” says Dr. Read. “This is a tragedy because HIV-positive infants are still being born. Women need to be offered HIV testing because if it is discovered they are indeed HIV-positive, they can begin treatment.”

For women who are either pregnant or considering becoming pregnant, an HIV test can provide information that can help them make informed and responsible decisions for the future health of both the mother and her baby.

Matte Story # 2

Living With HIV: The Experience of One Mother and Her child

Daniela’s* eyes fill with tears when she talks about her six-year-old daughter Koki*. “Sometimes I look at her taking the medication and I feel sick.”

Both Daniela and Koki are HIV-positive and each day they must take a mixture of medications to stay healthy enough to go to work and to school. Because Daniela did not know she was HIV-positive when she was pregnant, no precautions were taken to prevent the disease from passing from her to her infant daughter. “There are days when I just cry and keep quiet,” says Daniela, who would have passed the disease to Koki during pregnancy, labour or delivery, or through breastfeeding.

The greatest tragedy in Daniela and Koki’s story is that it could have been prevented. Several years ago, researchers discovered that HIV-positive women who receive treatment during pregnancy can dramatically decrease their chances of having HIV-positive infants. Since that time new treatments have been discovered and today HIV-positive women who follow the prescribed course of treatment have a 97 to 99 per cent chance of having healthy babies.

In 1998, shortly after this discovery, Ontario started offering routine HIV screening to all pregnant women and to women thinking about becoming pregnant – regardless of risk. Daniela, who immigrated to Canada from Uganda twelve years ago, never imagined she was HIV-positive. Shortly after Koki was born, she learned

that she had caught the disease from her ex-boyfriend.

“Like testing for hepatitis B, syphilis and rubella, the HIV test is a routine part of prenatal care that we strongly recommend,” says Dr. Stan Read, Chief, Infectious Diseases, Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “This voluntary blood test was introduced to ensure pregnant women who are HIV-positive remain as healthy as possible during and following their pregnancies and to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to baby.”

Unfortunately, despite the universal screening program, 20 per cent of pregnant women in Ontario are not being tested for HIV. As a result, HIV-infected infants continue to be born in the province.

“If I had known about the test, I would have been tested right away,” says Daniela.

“Some women are declining the test because they believe they are not at risk. Others are not being offered the test by their healthcare providers,” says Dr. Stan Read, Chief, Infectious Diseases, Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “This is a tragedy because HIV-infected babies are still being born.”

While Daniela and Koki face a difficult life filled with medications which come with unpleasant side effects, Daniela is not bitter towards the person who gave her the disease. However, she is set on preventing other women from falling into the same situation she did. “I just tell everyone to be tested (for HIV), because you just never know.”

* Not their real names

Matte Story # 3

Treatment for HIV during Pregnancy Protects Baby from Infection

Jasmine* cannot contain her pride when she talks about her 14-month-old daughter Alexia*. “She is just so smart, so full of life,” says the delighted mother. Jasmine has every right to be thrilled with her healthy little girl. While Jasmine is HIV-positive, Alexia is not.

Jasmine, who immigrated to North America from Africa eight years ago, had no idea she was HIV-positive until she requested an HIV test during her annual physical checkup. However, she decided to have a child when she learned the baby could be born healthy provided the proper precautions were taken. “I thought if it is me who has the sickness, let it only be me, but don’t let it be my child.”

Several years ago, medical researchers discovered that HIV-positive women who receive the proper treatment during pregnancy could dramatically decrease the chances of passing the disease on to their babies. Since that time new treatments have been discovered and today HIV-positive pregnant women who follow the prescribed course of treatment have a 97 to 99 per cent chance of giving birth to healthy babies.

In 1998, shortly after this discovery, Ontario started offering routine HIV screening to all pregnant women and to those thinking about becoming pregnant – regardless of risk. The HIV test can be done at the same time as other routine prenatal tests, or if a woman prefers, she can be tested at one of Ontario’s 33 anonymous HIV testing sites where identifying information is not collected and comprehensive counselling is guaranteed.

Like Jasmine, many women do not know they are HIV-positive until it is discovered during a routine blood test. Jasmine was fortunate to find out before she conceived. “I was absolutely shocked,” she says about the test results she received in 2000.

Ontario’s voluntary, routine HIV screening test for all pregnant women ensures they have the opportunity to remain as healthy as possible during and following their pregnancies and prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to baby.

Unfortunately, despite the screening program, 20 per cent of pregnant women in Ontario are still not being tested and as a result HIV-positive infants continue to be born in the province.

“Some women are declining the test because they believe they are not at risk. Others are not being offered the test by their healthcare provider,” says Dr. Stan Read, Chief, Infectious Diseases, Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “This is a tragedy to us as the continued birth of HIV-positive infants shows that these people need to be tested. Most importantly, women and their babies can be treated if it is discovered they are indeed HIV-positive.”

The best thing that has happened to Jasmine since learning she was HIV-negative was delivering a healthy daughter. “It was just such a huge relief. I still cannot believe it. It is such a blessing.”

* Not their real names