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Children with HIV: Majority got disease from mothers

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Children below the age of 15 are becoming infected with HIV at the rate of one child every minute per day on a global scale, and the number of cases in Southeast Asia and India is rising rapidly.

Nearly 4.5 million children below 15 have been infected with HIV since the AIDS epidemic began, and more than three million have died.

The majority of children acquired the virus from their mothers.

According to a statement released by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (Unaids) at the fifth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, the effects of the AIDS epidemic among young children were serious and far-reaching.

The five-day congress was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Putra World Trade Centre on Saturday.

AIDS, the statement said, threatened to reverse years of steady progress in child survival.

"Unaids believes that by 2010, AIDS may have increased the mortality of children under five years of age by more than 100 per cent in regions most affected by the virus."

According to Unaids, in countries where blood transfusions and blood products were regularly screened, and where clean syringes and needles were widely available in health centres and hospitals, mother-to-child transmission was the only source of infection in young children.

"The extremely high rates of HIV infection among women of childbearing age in some parts of the world, and the increasing risk of infection among women everywhere, is therefore troubling."

Unaids' three strategies for preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV are:

- * primary prevention, involving the promotion of safe and responsible sexual behaviour among couples, and providing them with knowledge of HIV/AIDS;

- * the provision of efficient and accessible family planning services;

and

- * an integrated package of measures comprising voluntary HIV counselling and testing, and the provision of anti-retroviral drugs for HIV-positive pregnant women and counselling on infant feeding.

Unaids believed that measures to protect girls and women from becoming infected in the first place should be part and parcel of every national AIDS programme.

"It is still common for women to be blamed for spreading sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV, despite the fact that very often they are infected by their husbands.

"Voluntary counselling and testing that involves the partners of pregnant women can play a vital role in challenging this pervasive prejudice."

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