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Pasteurizing Breast Milk May Prevent HIV Transmission

By Rose Hoban
 Boston, MA
 20 November 2006

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The HIV virus can be transmitted through breastfeeding

Every day, thousands of infants in the developing world are infected with HIV. Many get the virus that causes **AIDS** through breastfeeding from their HIV-positive mothers. Now some researchers think they may be able to prevent some of that transmission by having mothers pasteurize their breast milk.

According to researcher **Kiersten Israel-Ballard**, "We have found that [the technique] is able to kill HIV." She explains that HIV can come in two forms, one that is attached to the cell and one that is cell-free. "We've been able to show that this method can kill the cell-free HIV. We're still working on proving that the other form is destroyed, although that seems very promising."

Israel-Ballard says data show that most of the good things in breast milk, such as antibodies, proteins and vitamins, are preserved in the process, which she calls 'flash pasteurization.' She says women can do it at home with simple tools. "It involves the mother expressing her milk into a glass jar and then putting it into a pan that is full of water and she brings that to a boil. So when the water boils, she removes the milk and the milk has actually been flash pasteurized."

Working with a joint team from the University of California at Davis and at Berkeley, Israel-Ballard surveyed women in several African countries. She reports they overwhelmingly told her they'd be willing to perform the extra steps to keep their children from becoming infected.

"In developing countries ... most of the transmission happens

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from breast-feeding," the researcher points out, adding, "we need to really focus on safe ways that these babies can eat. They need breast milk in these countries because breast milk is protective. It prevents them from getting sick and dying from diarrheal diseases, respiratory illnesses. These babies die from these things. They don't only die from HIV."

Israel-Ballard says her team will look at doing a full trial of the method in several African countries in the near future. She was in Boston, Massachusetts this month at the American Public Health Association annual meeting.

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