

Understanding the link between HIV and preterm births

One in seven babies born prematurely in South Africa are born prematurely. Furthermore, approximately 250,000 babies are born to HIV positive mothers every year. Even if a baby is born HIV negative, having been exposed to the virus in the womb can have negative effects such as preterm birth, low birth weight and a compromised immune system.



Dr Nadia Chanzu-Ikumi, University of Cape Town (UCT) researcher at the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine is trying to understand what influence the HIV infection has on the immune system of the mother and consequently how that affects the unborn child.

“Early in my career, when I was working on a study involving HIV prevalence in Kenyan women, I came across the phenomenon of HIV-positive mothers having a higher risk of premature births. Often, even if these women carry their babies to term, the babies are born underweight and with compromised immune systems,” she says.

1,000 days of life

Researchers need to start thinking about the health of babies before they are born. There is a strong movement towards exploring all aspects of the first critical 1,000 days of life, since this period has a profound impact on the child's development. This research includes the first two years after birth, but most importantly it also explores the babies' health during the nine months in the womb.

Chanzu-Ikumi recently appeared in a video series published by the AXA Research Fund called *Motherhood*. It explores how to give babies the best start in life and investigates how environmental exposure could alter the developing immune systems of unborn babies, also highlighting the importance of the first 1,000 Days. In her interview, she talks about the risks for babies exposed to the HIV virus in utero such as preterm births or low birth weight.

"The idea behind the video is to create awareness about how the health of babies *in utero* can be affected by the external environment and the health of the mother," she says.

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