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**WHO urges poor nations to offer women deworming pills**

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Medicine reduces infant deaths, Nepal study says

By John Donnelly, Boston Globe Staff

PRETORIA -- The World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/> urged poor countries yesterday to offer deworming pills to pregnant women after a recent study in Nepal showed a 41 percent drop in the deaths of infants of mothers who took the pills before giving birth.

The pills, which cost 2 cents each, greatly improved the women's health by making them less anemic, leading to the delivery of healthier newborns. Parasites, notably hookworms, suck blood from intestines, greatly sapping the strength of those who are infected.

Roughly 2 billion people, or one-third of the world's population, carry worms such as water-borne schistosomiasis or soil-transmitted infections that include hookworm, roundworm, and whipworm. Of those infected, 300 million are often seriously ill, or debilitated, as a result. Therefore, any effective, affordable treatment could have a major impact. The Nepal study

[http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list\\_uids=15364190](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=15364190)

showed that the medicines commonly used to treat parasitic infections in pregnant women and children had much wider benefits than previously thought. Health officials said if poor countries began wide distribution of the drugs, the numbers of deaths of children as well as women during childbirth could be cut back dramatically.

"The numbers are remarkable, far higher than we would have imagined," Dr. Lorenzo Savioli, coordinator of WHO's parasite control program, said in a telephone interview from Geneva. "Giving deworming pills to pregnant women should become routine in all the world."

But outside of a handful of countries in Asia and Latin America, most poor nations do not promote the medicine. If the deworming pills are used at all, they are usually given to school-age children. Some countries have shied away from the medicines because of drug-company warnings on the labels against giving the drugs to pregnant women.

WHO officials yesterday said, however, that several recent studies have shown that the drugs do not harm pregnant women, and countries should ignore the warnings. One 1998 study in Sri Lanka of 40,000 women found that women taking the pills did not have higher birth defects than those who didn't, and in fact delivered healthier newborns on average.

Another study, on the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar, found that antiparasite treatment can reduce children's malnutrition by 62 percent and reduce anemia by 59 percent.

Most health authorities who closely follow maternal and childhood issues had long believed that the deworming pills could greatly improve children's health. But the evidence from Nepal, which Savioli said must be followed by other studies around the world, was the first strong evidence of the benefits to pregnant women.

The Nepal study, conducted by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and presented earlier this week at a meeting in Geneva of specialists on parasite control, found that 74 percent of the pregnant women in Nepal were infected with hookworm and that 54 percent had moderate to severe anemia because of the worms.

Most of the women in the study were given one pill of the drug albendazole in both the second and third trimester of pregnancy. When researchers checked on infants at six months, they found 14 percent fewer deaths among infants of mothers given one dose of the drug and 41 percent fewer deaths of children whose mothers were given two doses.

The number of childhood deaths indirectly related to worms is huge. An estimated 3.9 million children die each year from lower respiratory infections, 1.8 million from diarrheal diseases, and roughly 1 million from malaria. In many cases, worms greatly weaken children's immune systems, making them susceptible to those killer diseases.

In an editorial

[http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?\\_ob=ArticleURL&user=75682&handle=B-WA-A-W-BC-MSAYVA-UJW-AAUVEYDZAB-AAUWCZYVAB-DEVVUZCAW-BC-U&fmt=full&coverDate=12%2F04%2F2004&rdoc=1&orig=browse&srch=%23toc](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&user=75682&handle=B-WA-A-W-BC-MSAYVA-UJW-AAUVEYDZAB-AAUWCZYVAB-DEVVUZCAW-BC-U&fmt=full&coverDate=12%2F04%2F2004&rdoc=1&orig=browse&srch=%23toc) in the Dec. 4 edition the medical journal Lancet called for faster distribution of deworming pills. It noted that expansion of deworming programs also would strongly contribute toward reaching most of the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations. The most obvious impact would be in lowering child mortality and improving maternal health, but the editorial said that widespread deworming also would aid goals on universal primary education, eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, and promotion of gender equality.

"It's a burden that affects one-third of the world's population," Astrid James, deputy editor of the Lancet, said in an interview. "That is staggering, and yet there is something you can do about it, which is unusual. So far, greater attention needs to be paid to it."

Savioli, the WHO official, said the Nepal study results would be no surprise to veterinarians, who routinely give deworming pills to pregnant livestock.

"We've known that for a long time. There is no cow in Europe or the United States probably that is not dewormed. But humans? Nobody really cares about poor humans. . . . Animals are money. This disease affects only poor people, who don't vote, who sadly don't count in many estimations. This is a disease of poverty."

But he hopes the studies will eventually help hundreds of millions of the

poor. "This changes things for us," he said. "We're going to really push it."