UK NSC recommendation on screening for Human T-cell lymphotropic virus (HTLV) in pregnancy

Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend introducing screening for HTLV infection in pregnancy.

Human T-cell lymphotropic virus (HTLV) can be passed from person to person through blood transfusion or unprotected sexual contact. HTLV infection can also be passed from mother to child. This is usually through breastfeeding for longer than 6 months. HTLV is common in some parts of the world but not in Western countries such as the UK.

Only a small number of people with HTLV develop serious illness. These illnesses can include leukaemia (a form of cancer) or myelopathy (a nervous system condition).

There is no cure for HTLV. In areas where HTLV infection is common, the focus is on preventing it being passed from mother to child. This is done by avoiding breastfeeding or limiting the length of time that an infected mother breastfeeds her child.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

A national screening programme for HTLV is not recommended in the UK because:

- the balance of benefit and harm from screening has not been studied
- the number of people infected with HTLV in the UK is not known
- the risk of a mother passing HTLV to her child through breastfeeding is low unless breastfeeding is continued beyond 6 months
- most infants infected with HTLV do not develop symptoms and the risk of developing a serious illness appears to be low
- there is no treatment for HTLV found in screened women or babies who acquire the infection despite avoidance of breastfeeding
- anxiety, depression and stigma have been reported in women who have been screened and their families

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available.

To find out more about the UK NSC’s recommendation on screening for HTLV infection, please visit:

`legacyscreening.phe.org.uk/htlv`

The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) advises ministers and the NHS in the 4 UK countries about all aspects of screening and supports implementation of screening programmes.

Find out more about the UK National Screening Committee at www.gov.uk/uknsc. The UK NSC evidence review process is described at www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nsc-evidence-review-process and a list of all UK NSC recommendations can be found at legacy.screening.nhs.uk/recommendations

The UK NSC secretariat is hosted by Public Health England (www.gov.uk/phe).