

50% RISE IN CHILD BIRTH INFECTION

Campaigners demand routine testing

EXCLUSIVE

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A DEADLY bug that passes from mother to baby during child-birth is claiming more victims every year, new figures reveal.

The number of babies contracting Group B Streptococcus, or GBS, has risen 50% from 2003 to 2010.

And as campaigners demand routine screening - which they say can prevent up to 90% of infections - the Department of Health yesterday admitted the issue was now "critical".

GBS is the most common cause of life-threatening infection in newborn babies in the UK, causing meningitis, blood poisoning and pneumonia.

It can lead to long-term problems

including deafness, blindness, cerebral palsy and in severe cases, death.

Routine tests are already carried out in some countries and Prime Minister David Cameron tabled three Early Day Motions while in Opposition, calling for testing on the NHS - but so far his Government has done nothing.

New HPA figures show there were 340 cases of GBS among babies under 90 days old in 2003 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, by 2010 that had risen 49%, to 506 cases.

The infection claims the lives of up to 75 babies in the UK, leaving another 40 with serious long-term problems.

Jane Plumb, who founded the charity Group B Strep Support, said: "These infections are increasing at a time when other countries have seen

numbers fall. The Government should introduce a screening programme at the earliest opportunity."

The charity wants all women to be offered a test at 35-37 weeks. If the infection is detected, doctors can then prevent transmission to the baby by giving antibiotics during labour.

Philip Steer, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Imperial College London, said: "The USA, Australia, Spain, Italy and Germany have introduced screening and seen major falls in this deadly disease.

Screening would be equally effective in the UK."

A Department of Health spokesman said yesterday: "The Department recognises preventing GBS is a critical issue... The National Screening Committee is reviewing

the evidence."

► **SUPPORTER** Prof Steer

