

## REPORT BY DIETHYLSTILBOESTROL (DES) ACTION AUSTRALIA - NSW TO WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2006

### Background

Diethylstilboestrol (DES) is a synthetic oestrogen that was developed to supplement a woman's natural oestrogen production. It was first prescribed in 1938 for women experiencing miscarriages or premature deliveries and was originally considered effective and safe. In 1971 physicians were advised to stop prescribing DES to pregnant women because it was linked to a rare vaginal/cervical cancer in female offspring. Since 1971 research has shown:

- Women prescribed DES while pregnant, known as DES mothers, are at a modestly increased risk for breast cancer.
- Women exposed to DES before birth (in the womb), known as DES daughters, are at an increased risk for clear cell adenocarcinoma (CCA) of the vagina and cervix, reproductive tract structural differences, pregnancy complications and infertility. The risk for developing this cancer is approximately 1:1,000 DES daughters. Although DES daughters appear to be at highest risk for clear cell cancer in their teens and early 20s, cases have been reported in the 30-50 age groups. This cancer is aggressive and should be detected early.
- Men exposed to DES before birth (in the womb), known as DES sons, are at risk for non-cancerous epididymal cysts.

There is specific preventive health care for DES exposure. (See [www.cdc.gov/des](http://www.cdc.gov/des) ) The cancer risk to DES daughters has not passed, with cases now occurring in the 40s and 50s age groups. (See <http://obgyn.bsd.uchicago.edu/registry.html#accessions>)

Researchers are still following the health of the DES-exposed population to determine whether other health problems occur with age. There may be many people who do not know they were exposed to DES and some women may not remember taking DES. DES information is important because people who were exposed must be vigilant about their own health care – to catch cancers early, demand high risk obstetric care when pregnant and factor in their exposure when making decisions about HRT use. It is as much part of a person's medical history as a family history toward heart disease or diabetes.

### Extent of antenatal DES usage

Never patented, DES was marketed under more than 200 brand names and was prescribed to pregnant women in many countries of the world, including USA (estimated 5-10 million DES exposed\*), Canada (estimated 400,000-800,000 DES exposed\*), UK (estimated 20,000 DES exposed\*), France (estimated 400,000 DES exposed\*), Australia (estimated 60,000 DES exposed\*), The Netherlands (estimated 440,000 DES exposed\*),

\* *Figure includes women and offspring.*