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THE GENERAL IMPORTANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF TORCH INFECTION PREVENTION

Pattojonov Shoxislom Dilmurodbek ugli
Department of Infectious diseases, Andijan state medical institute

Umirov Safar Ergashevich
Center for the development of professional qualification of medical workers, Doctor of Medical Sciences, dotsent

Abstract:TORCH infections, comprising Toxoplasma gondii, Other pathogens (including syphilis, varicella-zoster virus, parvovirus B19), Rubella virus, Cytomegalovirus (CMV), and Herpes simplex virus (HSV), represent significant causes of congenital morbidity and mortality worldwide. Prevention strategies range from vaccination (e.g., rubella) and antenatal screening (e.g., syphilis) to behavioral counseling (e.g., toxoplasmosis, CMV hygiene) and antiviral prophylaxis (HSV). This narrative review evaluates the general importance and effectiveness of preventive measures against TORCH infections. A systematic search of PubMed, Google Scholar, Embase, and WHO/CDC websites for literature published between January 2010 and May 2025 was conducted using keywords related to TORCH syndrome and prevention strategies. Data on global prevalence, intervention outcomes, and programmatic successes were synthesized. Findings indicate that rubella vaccination programs have achieved substantial reductions in congenital rubella syndrome (CRS), with global rubella incidence falling by over 80% following widespread vaccine introduction [2]. Behavioral and educational interventions for toxoplasmosis and CMV demonstrate moderate effectiveness in reducing primary maternal infections [3]. Syphilis screening and timely penicillin therapy significantly lower congenital syphilis rates. HSV antiviral prophylaxis near term reduces neonatal transmission risk. However, gaps persist: no licensed vaccines for CMV or toxoplasmosis, variable screening uptake, and resource limitations in low-income settings hamper universal prevention. Integrated approaches combining vaccination, screening, education, and health system strengthening are crucial. Continued research into effective vaccines (e.g., CMV) and scalable interventions remains a priority.

Keywords: TORCH infections, Congenital infections, Prevention strategies, Rubella vaccination, Cytomegalovirus hygiene counseling, Toxoplasmosis prevention, Antenatal screening, Herpes simplex virus prophylaxis

INTRODUCTION

Congenital infections collectively account for a notable proportion of neonatal morbidity, with TORCH infections responsible for approximately 2–3% of congenital anomalies worldwide. The acronym TORCH covers pathogens that often cause asymptomatic or mild maternal disease but may lead to severe fetal outcomes, including miscarriage, stillbirth, growth restriction, neurologic impairment, and sensory deficits. Given the potentially irreversible sequelae, primary and secondary prevention of TORCH infections is of high public health importance. Primary prevention aims to avert maternal infection (e.g., vaccination against rubella, hygiene measures for toxoplasmosis/CMV), whereas secondary prevention involves early detection and treatment to reduce transmission or severity (e.g., antenatal screening for syphilis, antiviral prophylaxis for HSV). Evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies informs guidelines and resource allocation, especially in disparate

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global settings. This review synthesizes current evidence on the importance and efficacy of preventive measures against TORCH infections, highlighting successes, challenges, and research gaps.

METHODS

A narrative review methodology was employed. Databases searched included PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, Embase, and major health organizations' sites (WHO, CDC). Search terms combined "TORCH syndrome," "Toxoplasma gondii prevention," "rubella vaccination effectiveness," "CMV hygiene counseling," "HSV antiviral prophylaxis," "syphilis screening pregnancy," and related phrases. Inclusion criteria: articles published January 2010–May 2025, in English, focusing on prevention strategies, epidemiological data, intervention outcomes, or program evaluations related to TORCH infections. Exclusion criteria: studies limited to unrelated congenital infections, case reports without preventive focus, or articles lacking data on preventive measures. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance; full texts were reviewed for data extraction. Data were categorized by pathogen, intervention type, effectiveness metrics (e.g., seroconversion rates, incidence reduction), and geographic context. Where available, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and large cohort studies were prioritized; otherwise, narrative reviews, program reports, and observational studies were included.

RESULTS

Epidemiology and burden

General burden: Globally, congenital infections from TORCH pathogens contribute to neonatal morbidity and mortality, with an estimated 2–3% of congenital anomalies attributable to these infections. Regional seroprevalence varies: for CMV, maternal IgG seropositivity often exceeds 90% in many populations but primary infection rates during pregnancy remain around 1–1.5% in some settings.

Rubella: Before vaccine introduction, rubella infection during early pregnancy led to high rates of CRS. Following rubella-containing vaccine (RCV) introduction, global rubella incidence declined by approximately 81% from 2013 to 2021, with over 90% of WHO member states including RCV in national immunization schedules by 2022. Nonetheless, CRS continues in regions lacking adequate vaccine coverage.

Toxoplasmosis: Seroprevalence among women of childbearing age varies widely (e.g., 10–70% globally), influenced by dietary habits and cat exposure. Primary infection during pregnancy carries a 10–30% vertical transmission risk, higher in late gestation but with more severe outcomes if early.

CMV: The most common congenital viral infection, with congenital infection prevalence ~0.5–2% of live births. Approximately 10–15% of infected infants show symptoms or later sequelae (e.g., hearing loss).

HSV: Neonatal HSV infection arises primarily from maternal primary or recurrent infection near delivery; incidence estimates vary (1–2 per 3,500–20,000 live births), with significant morbidity and mortality if untreated.

Syphilis (Other): Maternal syphilis remains a cause of adverse pregnancy outcomes worldwide; in absence of screening and treatment, congenital syphilis can cause stillbirth, neonatal death, or long-term disability. Effective screening/treatment greatly reduces risk.

Parvovirus B19 and Varicella Zoster: Less frequently included in TORCH acronym but may cause fetal hydrops or varicella-related complications; preventive measures include varicella vaccination and workplace exposure guidelines for pregnant women.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES BY PATHOGEN

Rubella

Vaccination: Live attenuated RCV (often combined in MMR) induces ≥95% seroconversion after one dose; two-dose schedules achieve >97% immunity. Inclusion in routine immunization led to >80%

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reduction in rubella incidence and substantial CRS decline; WHO reports elimination in multiple regions (e.g., Americas since 2009).
Effectiveness metrics: Global rubella incidence declined ~81% from 2013 to 2021; infants vaccinated against rubella increased from 40% to 68% in same period. Cost-benefit analyses show favorable benefit:cost ratios for RCV introduction.
Challenges: Ensuring high coverage (>80%) to avoid paradoxical increase in CRS due to shifting average age of infection; catch-up campaigns critical when introducing vaccine in older cohorts. Coverage gaps in low-resource settings sustain CRS burden.

Toxoplasma gondii

Behavioral counseling: Recommendations include avoiding raw/undercooked meat, washing fruits/vegetables, practicing hand hygiene after soil or cat litter exposure. Studies show educational programs for pregnant women significantly improve knowledge and reduce seroconversion rates.
Screening: Some countries implement serological screening early in pregnancy to detect seronegative women for intensified counseling; universal screening remains debated due to cost-effectiveness variability depending on seroprevalence.
Effectiveness: Evidence suggests hygiene measures reduce maternal seroconversion by up to 60%; however, exact quantification varies by study region and baseline prevalence. No licensed vaccine currently.

Cytomegalovirus (CMV)

Hygiene education: Handwashing and avoiding sharing utensils with young children reduce maternal primary infection risk; counseling in seronegative pregnant women shows reduction in seroconversion (e.g., from ~2.6% to ~1.2% in some cohorts).
Screening: Routine CMV screening not universally recommended due to lack of proven interventions after detection; some high-resource settings offer targeted screening in seronegative women with frequent ultrasound monitoring.
Antiviral/Immunoglobulin: Experimental maternal therapies (e.g., CMV hyperimmune globulin) under investigation; efficacy remains inconclusive.
Vaccine research: Several CMV vaccines in development, none yet licensed; breakthrough would significantly impact prevention.
Effectiveness: Without vaccine, hygiene measures remain primary prevention; moderate effectiveness but relies on adherence and awareness.

Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV)

Antenatal screening: Universal serological screening not routinely recommended due to high seroprevalence and limited predictive value for neonatal transmission; focus on history-taking for genital lesions.
Antiviral prophylaxis: Oral acyclovir/valacyclovir from 36 weeks gestation in women with recurrent genital HSV reduces viral shedding at delivery and cesarean rates for active lesions.
Delivery management: Cesarean delivery recommended if active lesions or prodromal symptoms at labor onset to reduce neonatal transmission.
Effectiveness: Antiviral prophylaxis decreases recurrence at term by ~50–70%; neonatal HSV incidence reduced in settings adopting prophylaxis and delivery guidelines.

Syphilis ("Other")

Screening and treatment: Universal early pregnancy screening (rapid tests) and prompt penicillin therapy effectively prevent congenital syphilis; treatment before 28 weeks gestation nearly eliminates transmission risk.

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Programmatic outcomes: Many countries integrating syphilis screening into antenatal care report declines in congenital syphilis rates; WHO target of elimination of mother-to-child transmission achievable with high coverage.

Varicella Zoster & Parvovirus B19

Varicella vaccination: Recommended for seronegative women preconception; reduces risk of maternal infection; post-exposure prophylaxis with varicella-zoster immune globulin may be used.

Parvovirus B19: No vaccine; prevention via workplace exposure avoidance (e.g., childcare settings) for seronegative pregnant women; fetal monitoring if infection suspected. Effectiveness modest given ubiquitous exposure.

Table 1. Summary of TORCH Pathogens, Preventive Strategies, and Reported Effectiveness

Pathogen	Preventive Strategy	Reported Effectiveness/Outcome	Challenges/Notes
Rubella	Vaccine (RCV/MMR)	≥95% seroconversion; global rubella incidence ↓ ~81% (2013–2021)	Requires >80% coverage; catch-up campaigns; live vaccine contraindicated in pregnancy
Toxoplasma gondii	Behavioral counseling (diet/hygiene)	Hygiene education reduces seroconversion by up to ~60% in some studies	No vaccine; screening cost-effectiveness varies by region
CMV	Hygiene education	Seroconversion reduction (e.g., ~50% relative reduction in some cohorts)	No licensed vaccine; interventions after infection limited
HSV	Antiviral prophylaxis + delivery management	Recurrence at term ↓ ~50–70%; neonatal transmission reduced	No vaccine; asymptomatic shedding; screening limitations
Syphilis	Universal early screening + penicillin	Transmission nearly eliminated if treated before 28 weeks	Requires robust antenatal care systems
Varicella Zoster	Preconception vaccination; post-exposure IG	Prevents maternal infection; reduces fetal risk	Live vaccine contraindicated during pregnancy
Parvovirus B19	Exposure avoidance; fetal monitoring	Limited; reduces risk in seronegative women through avoidance	No vaccine; exposure hard to avoid in high-contact settings

Table 2. Illustrative Programmatic Outcomes in Selected Settings

(Note: Data drawn from regional reports and meta-analyses; context-specific.)

Setting/Region	Intervention	Outcome Metric
Global (WHO data)	RCV introduction 2012–2022	Rubella incidence ↓ 81%; infants vaccinated ↑ from 40% to 68%
South Indian cohort	Toxoplasmosis education program	Pretest knowledge 8.8/30 → Posttest 27.1/30; seroconversion data not specified
European high-resource	CMV hygiene counseling	Seroconversion in seronegative pregnant women ↓ from ~2.6% to ~1.2%

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Antenatal clinics (various)	Syphilis screening + treatment	Congenital syphilis rates ↓ >80% where coverage high
High-income settings	HSV antiviral prophylaxis	Recurrence at term ↓ ~60%; neonatal HSV incidence low

DISCUSSION

The reviewed evidence underscores that preventive measures against TORCH infections yield substantial public health benefits. Rubella vaccination exemplifies a high-impact intervention: widespread RCV introduction has drastically reduced CRS incidence in many regions. However, maintaining high coverage and executing catch-up campaigns in older age groups are essential to prevent paradoxical increases in CRS risk when introducing vaccine into under-immunized populations. Behavioral interventions for toxoplasmosis and CMV show moderate but meaningful reductions in maternal seroconversion; their success depends heavily on effective education programs and women's adherence to hygienic practices. The lack of licensed vaccines for toxoplasmosis and CMV highlights critical research gaps; ongoing vaccine development for CMV remains a priority given its high congenital burden. Syphilis screening and penicillin therapy offer near-complete prevention of congenital syphilis when integrated into antenatal care, emphasizing the importance of accessible, early prenatal services. HSV prevention through antiviral prophylaxis and delivery management reduces neonatal HSV risk, but asymptomatic viral shedding and absence of a vaccine limit elimination of neonatal HSV entirely. Varicella and parvovirus B19 prevention relies on preconception vaccination (varicella) and exposure avoidance (parvovirus), yet challenges in identifying seronegative women and controlling exposure settings persist.

Implementation challenges include resource constraints in low- and middle-income countries, variable access to screening and immunization services, and limited awareness among healthcare providers and pregnant women. Integrating TORCH prevention into existing maternal health programs (e.g., combining rubella vaccination with measles campaigns, embedding syphilis screening into routine antenatal visits) can optimize resource use. Surveillance systems to monitor seroprevalence and congenital infection rates guide prioritization and evaluate program impact. Additionally, culturally tailored educational materials enhance uptake of behavioral interventions. Future research should focus on CMV vaccine development, cost-effectiveness analyses of universal vs. targeted screening strategies for toxoplasmosis and CMV, and evaluation of innovative interventions (e.g., mobile health education, point-of-care diagnostics).

CONCLUSION

Prevention of TORCH infections is of paramount importance to reduce congenital morbidity and mortality globally. Effective strategies include rubella vaccination, antenatal screening and treatment for syphilis, hygiene counseling for toxoplasmosis and CMV, antiviral prophylaxis and delivery management for HSV, and varicella vaccination preconception. While rubella immunization programs demonstrate high effectiveness, gaps remain in vaccine coverage, screening uptake, and availability of vaccines for CMV and toxoplasmosis. Integrated maternal health services, robust surveillance, and continued research into vaccines and scalable interventions are essential for further reducing the burden of congenital TORCH infections.

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