

Aspirin may help stop miscarriages

THOUSANDS of women who suffer recurrent miscarriages could be helped by a simple and inexpensive treatment with aspirin that has dramatically improved birth rates in women with a blood-clotting disorder.

A team at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital Trust in London has increased the birth rate from 19 to 70 per cent in the women diagnosed with Hughes syndrome, which makes them prone to blood clots, which are the likely cause of their miscarriages.

But the doctors believe that up to 70 per cent of other women who have recurrent miscarriages, and in whom the syndrome is undiagnosed, could also be helped by treatment with low-dose aspirin and the anti-coagulant drug heparin, plus close monitoring during their pregnancy.

It is estimated that between 10 and 30 per cent of pregnancies end in miscarriage, most of them in the first three months. Another five per cent manage to carry their babies up to 22 weeks before losing them.

Dr Graham Hughes, consultant physician at St Thomas's, after whom the syndrome is named, said: "I have never been involved in

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such a positive clinical subject. The results are dramatic." Results of a study of 47 women who had 60 pregnancies between 1989 and 1994 and who had the aspirin and heparin treatment are to be published in the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Rheumatology*.

Details of the study were given to a meeting of the Association of Physicians in Manchester on Friday. Each of the women had lost at least one baby. Thirty-seven had lost several. They had 137 pregnancies between them but only 26 live babies had been born.

Dr Hughes discovered the blood disorder in 1983 through work with patients with systemic lupus erythematosus, an auto-immune disease that causes inflammation and pain in the joints, blotchy skin and can affect internal organs.

Miscarriage is a feature of women with lupus. Ten per cent of the 30,000 women in Britain with lupus are now known to have Hughes syndrome.

But it has also become clear that women without lupus can have Hughes syndrome, which is also called

antiphospholipid syndrome or APS. It is a disorder which makes the blood sticky and which doctors believe increasingly is common in the population.

A pregnant woman who is affected can have blood clots in the placenta which kill areas of the placental tissue. This is the probable cause of the miscarriages. "We now think it is a major cause of recurrent miscarriages," Dr Hughes said.

"If a woman has had one miscarriage I think she should be screened for APS.

"Very many women could be helped by this simple treatment. If they have APS they should be started on aspirin early in their pregnancy."

But he warned pregnant women against treating themselves with aspirin without having a blood test and formal diagnosis.

"Interest has grown in APS. Things have started to happen. There is an international conference in America in October and we are being inundated at the clinic with requests for help," he said.

Dr Hughes said they were still investigating the best doses and formulations of blood-thinning drugs to give to women with APS.

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Special delivery: Shirley Francis and her son Lewis, born after aspirin treatment