

Hepatitis B and pregnancy



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. It can be spread through blood and body fluids including during delivery. When babies become infected with hepatitis B, they have about a 90% chance of developing a lifelong, chronic infection. Left untreated, about 1 in 4 children with chronic infection can die early from liver related complications.

All pregnant women should get a blood test for hepatitis B as part of routine prenatal care.

If your test is positive for hepatitis B, you will be counselled and offered further testing and care. Women with chronic hepatitis B infection can have normal healthy pregnancies and deliver healthy normal babies without increased risk.

Treatment is available for you if needed. Additional tests may be needed to see if you would benefit from medicines to further protect your baby from becoming infected.

If you are planning on starting a family, have your test now.

If you are already on treatment for hepatitis B, it is safe to continue whilst pregnant (speak with your doctor).

Protect your family: Test and vaccinate your family (including older children)

Hepatitis B virus is very infectious and can also spread to other family members through contact with blood, semen or other body fluids from an infected person. Your baby's father and everyone else who lives in your house should go to the doctor or clinic to be tested. A vaccine is available and will protect your family from getting infected.

Protect your baby: vaccination, immune globulin and antiviral therapy

Risk of transmission is related to the amount of virus in the mother's blood at the time of delivery and can be as high as 90%, but measures are available to reduce this to almost 0.

Vaccination: All babies are given a birth dose of hepatitis B vaccine irrespective of the mother's hepatitis status. If you have hepatitis B, this dose is critical in reducing risk of infection and needs to be given as close to being born as possible (<12 hours). Hepatitis B vaccine is extremely safe.

In some places, an additional shot called hepatitis immune globulin (HBIG) is given at the same time (different site) to add extra protection/boost to fight the virus at birth.

Your baby then should complete all of the childhood vaccines (usually completed by 6 months). Your baby should then be tested for hepatitis B (a tiny drop of blood taken from a needle prick) after 9 months.

Antiviral medicines: In addition to the above, some mothers may be offered tablets to further reduce the chance of baby becoming infected. To ensure that there is enough time for the medicines to work, you will be asked to start around week 28 of pregnancy and continue till after delivery (usually 6 weeks). They are taken once a day, and have shown to reduce the chance of baby's infection, safe for you and the baby.

Breast feeding does not pose an increase risk of transmission and is safe. Breastfeeding whilst on medicines for hepatitis B is also safe for you, your pregnancy and the baby.

Take care of yourself:

You can have a healthy and long life with hepatitis. It is important to remember to take good care of your health, maintain a healthy weight, eat a balanced diet and avoid anything that can harm the liver such as alcohol. Regular check ups and taking medicines if advised is important.

For further information:

Local contact:

<https://hepatitisbfree.org.au/>