

HEPATITIS B VIRUS AND PREGNANCY

What is hepatitis B and what illness does this cause?

Hepatitis B is a viral illness. The hepatitis B virus infects the liver and can cause serious disease. Persons who are newly infected with hepatitis B virus (acute infection) may develop symptoms such as loss of appetite, tiredness, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, dark (tea or cola-colored) urine, light-colored stools, and sometimes rash or joint pain. Jaundice (yellowing of eyes or skin) may also be present. Some people have no symptoms at all and may not know they have been infected. If the virus is present for more than six months, the person is considered to have a chronic (lifelong) infection. As long as persons are infected with the hepatitis B virus, they can spread the virus to other people.

Is hepatitis B serious?

Most people who have an acute infection recover without problems. However, a small number (6% to 10%) will develop chronic infection. Most people who are chronically infected have no symptoms and feel healthy. However, some people do develop non-specific symptoms at times when the virus is reproducing and causing liver problems. People with lifelong hepatitis B infection can develop cirrhosis of the liver, liver cancer, and/or liver failure, which can lead to death.

If I've been exposed to someone infected with the hepatitis B virus, what should I do?

An exposure is defined as contact with blood or other body fluids of an infected person. Contact includes touching the blood or body fluids when you have open cuts or wounds (that are less than 24 hours old), splashing blood or bloody body fluids into the eyes or mouth, being stuck with a needle or other sharp object that has blood on it, or having sex or sharing needles with someone with hepatitis B virus. A baby can get hepatitis B from its infected mother during childbirth. It is not spread through food or water or by casual contact (e.g., shaking hands or kissing the face of a person who is infected with hepatitis B).

Everyone who has an exposure to a person infected with hepatitis B virus should have blood tests done as soon as possible to determine whether treatment is needed.

At the time of exposure, persons who have never had the disease or vaccine (susceptible to the virus) should receive a dose of hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine. Doses two and three of the vaccine series should be completed on schedule. In some cases, people who have already been vaccinated may be tested and/or revaccinated.

How will this exposure affect my pregnancy?

If a mother develops hepatitis B during her pregnancy, there is a chance that the baby may also become infected. If the mother develops acute hepatitis in the third trimester of pregnancy or the immediate postpartum period, the risk of infection for the newborn baby may be 60% to 70%. It is very important that the baby receive treatment right after birth to get as much protection as possible.

If you have hepatitis B virus in your blood, you can pass hepatitis B to your baby during the birthing process. About 90% of infected infants will develop chronic infection. They may have the virus for the rest of their lives and be a source to spread the disease. There may be long-term effects from acquiring hepatitis B at such an early age.

Can anything be done to protect my baby?

All pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B virus early in their pregnancy. **The testing should be done during each pregnancy.** If the blood test is positive for hepatitis B virus, the baby should receive the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine along with a shot of HBIG within the first 12 hours of life. The vaccine series should be completed on time. Check with your healthcare provider for the schedule for dose 2 and dose 3 of the vaccine. Once the baby has turned 1 year of age, the baby should have a blood test to make sure infection did not occur and that the vaccine is protecting the baby.

I have had a blood test for hepatitis B. What do the results of the blood test show?

The blood test for hepatitis B may show that you:

- Are immune (had hepatitis B disease or vaccine in the past) and have no sign of recent infection. You are protected and do not need to worry about hepatitis B.
- Are not immune and have not yet been infected. You should receive the hepatitis B vaccine series if you are at risk of blood exposures at your job or through risk behaviors in your personal life. Talk to your healthcare provider about this.
- Have had a recent infection. Discuss the situation with your healthcare provider.
- Have chronic infection. Talk to your healthcare provider about regular medical evaluation and monitoring.

Is there a way I can keep from being infected with hepatitis B during my pregnancy?

Yes, get vaccinated. It is safe to get hepatitis B vaccine while you are pregnant. In the meantime:

- Wear gloves when handling blood and body fluids.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated objects or surfaces and wear gloves. (See pgs 34-35.)
- Wash hands after removing gloves.
- DO NOT share personal care items, such as toothbrushes, razors, or nail clippers.
- If your sexual partner is infected with hepatitis B virus, use latex condoms during intercourse.
- DO NOT share needles to inject drugs or to perform tattoos or body piercings.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 543-5230 or call your local health department.