

## Fact Sheet

# Hepatitis B pregnancy and breastfeeding

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### What is hepatitis B ?

The word hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by a number of different things, like contact with chemicals, some drugs and herbal medicines, alcohol and some viruses (germs). There are three main viruses that effect the liver : hepatitis A, B and C.

Hepatitis B can cause long-term serious liver damage. Talk to your doctor for more information about this.

### How is Hepatitis B spread?

Around the world, the main way hepatitis B is spread is from mothers who have hepatitis B infection passing it on to their babies at or around the time of birth. Without treatment up to 9 of every 10 mothers with hepatitis B infection pass it to their baby.

Hepatitis B is also spread:

- among children, through close personal contact or by open cuts or sores
- among people who inject drugs, through sharing equipment that has been contaminated with hepatitis B
- among people who have sexual contact without using a condom
- among people who have tattooing and body piercing when the equipment has become contaminated with hepatitis B
- by unsterile medical practices and/or blood transfusions in some overseas countries.

A vaccination is available to protect people from hepatitis B. It is part of Australia's routine vaccination program.

### Does Hepatitis B affect pregnancy?

Generally, where the mother has hepatitis B infection there should be no impact on the pregnancy or birth process - except for the risk of her baby being born with hepatitis B infection.



### Should I be tested for Hepatitis B?

**ALL** pregnant women are tested for hepatitis B as part of routine pregnancy screening. A positive result (hepatitis B infection) will not change the way you are cared for by the hospital staff or your doctor. Testing will ensure that you and your baby receive the best possible care.

If you do test positive for hepatitis B, you should make sure you are referred to a doctor who is an expert in hepatitis B and pregnancy. Your baby can then be tested for the virus at 9 months.

### Can I reduce the risk to my baby?

If you have hepatitis B, the risk of passing it on to your baby is high, but this risk can be reduced.

Your doctor will monitor the amount of the hepatitis B virus in your blood, and if it is high may recommend that you have a short course of treatment to lower the level and reduce the chance of it being transferred to your baby.

Babies of hepatitis B infected mothers must be given injections of hepatitis B immunoglobulin and hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. These injections help to protect the baby from the virus but there is up to a 10% chance of the baby catching it, especially if the virus level in the mother is very high at the time of birth.

This means that it is also important that babies born to mothers with hepatitis B infection get their vaccinations on time at 2, 4 and 6 months of age. This can be done by your GP or local council or community health baby clinic.

All babies born to mothers infected with hepatitis B should be monitored by a doctor who is expert in treating children with hepatitis B. The baby must have their immunity checked when they are **9 months old**.

Even if you and your baby don't have hepatitis B, your baby should have their first dose of vaccine before you leave hospital and get their routine

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vaccinations at 2, 4 and 6 months of age. This vaccination course will protect your baby from the risk from other children as he/she grows up.

**Can I still breastfeed if I have hepatitis B?**

Yes, there are many benefits of breastfeeding your baby. The current recommendation of the World Health Organisation is that women who have hepatitis B can safely breastfeed their baby.

**Where can I get more information?**

**Nepean hospital, Liver Clinic 024734 3466**

**Storr Liver Clinic Westmead 02 9845 7705**

**Hep C Helpline 1800 803 990**

**Information about Hepatitis B vaccines  
02 9840 3603**

**[www.hep.org.au](http://www.hep.org.au)**

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