

Fact Sheet

Hepatitis C in pregnancy and breastfeeding

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Hepatitis C in pregnancy and breastfeeding

The word Hepatitis is a medical term for inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis may be caused by chemicals, drugs, alcohol and virus (tiny germs). Several kinds of viruses can cause hepatitis. These viruses are different to each other, and can:

- cause different illnesses
- be transmitted in different ways
- require different forms of treatment

How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through blood to blood contact. This means that the blood of a person with Hepatitis C gets into the bloodstream of another person. In Australia the greatest risk for the spread of Hepatitis C is through the sharing and reusing of drug equipment like needles, syringes, spoons and tourniquets. Other ways that Hepatitis C can be spread include:

- unsterile medical procedures
- unsterile tattooing and body piercing
- sharing personal hygiene items like toothbrushes and razors

Unlike Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C is **NOT** classified as a sexually transmitted disease. However sexual transmission is possible if there is blood to blood contact during sex. Hepatitis C cannot be spread by sharing cups, knives, toilets or laundry facilities.

Does Hepatitis C affect pregnancy?

Generally there is no additional risk to the baby or the pregnancy where the mother has Hepatitis C, and having the virus does not increase the risk of complications throughout the pregnancy. Being pregnant will not cause an increase in liver disease in a woman with Hep C.

Should I be tested for Hepatitis C?

If you believe that you have ever been exposed to Hepatitis C it is recommended that you are tested for Hepatitis C antibodies. A positive result will not change your antenatal care however testing will ensure that direct blood contact between mother and baby is reduced.

Can I infect my baby?

There is a risk that your baby will be born with Hepatitis C. This happens in around 5% of cases (5 out of every hundred pregnant women who are Hepatitis C positive)

There are several things that influence the chance of this happening. For example, if the level of the virus in the mother's blood at the time of birth is high, and if the woman also has HIV, the chance of transmitting the virus is higher. Before birth, invasive tests should be avoided because there is a risk the virus may be passed on to the baby.

Can I still breastfeed?

There are many benefits of breastfeeding and although the Hepatitis C virus has been found in breast milk, the levels of the virus are so low that transmission is not believed to be likely.

Current recommendation by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is that breastfeeding is a low risk for transmission of Hepatitis C and so women who have the virus can breastfeed their baby if they wish to do so.

If you develop cracked or bleeding nipples, or if your baby has bleeding gums, it is recommended that you temporarily stop breastfeeding until the wounds are healed. During this time the breast should be expressed and the milk discarded. Once the nipples are healed, breastfeeding may be re-started.

Is there a treatment for Hepatitis C?

Yes, there is treatment available for Hepatitis C, however it is not used during pregnancy or while a mother is breastfeeding, as the drugs used can affect developing babies. Discuss this with your GP and if you are still concerned request a referral to a specialist.



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Can my baby be tested for Hepatitis C?

It is recommended that babies born to mothers, who have Hepatitis C, be screened for Hepatitis C antibody tests at 18 months or older. However, earlier screening for Hepatitis C may be done if parents are particularly concerned.

What should I do if my baby tests positive for Hepatitis C?

If your baby tests positive for Hepatitis C, he or she should be referred to a paediatric liver specialist for an initial assessment.

Your baby should have follow-up testing at 24 months with a blood test to see if it cleared the virus (there is a one in four chance of this happening). If your baby develops long term infection (chronic Hepatitis C), then continuous follow up is required for monitoring

Where can I get more information?

Nepean Hospital, Liver clinic 02 47343466

Storr Liver Clinic Westmead 029845 7705

Hep C Helpline 1800 803 990

www.hep.org.au

Street parking is available near the hospital or within the hospital grounds for a fee.

We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.

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WSLHD-Get_Involved@health.nsw.gov.au