

Hepatitis C – Newborn

What is Hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver that is caused by a virus.
- The virus is found in the blood of persons who are infected by the disease.
- Most people who are infected with Hepatitis C do not get sick and have no symptoms. Those who do have symptoms may feel tired, have little or no appetite or have yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).
- The virus can stay in the liver for many years and cause liver damage later in life. Many people carry the virus in their blood for the rest of their lives and may infect others.

How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread by direct contact with the blood of an infected person.

Hepatitis C can be spread:

- from a woman to her baby during pregnancy or birth
- from blood or blood products
- from tattoo, body piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis equipment that is not sterilized
- by having sex with an infected partner (having many sex partners increases the risk of contact with Hepatitis C)
- from sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files or other items which could have tiny amounts of infected blood on them
- by an accidental poke or cut with a needle or sharp object that has infected blood on it
- from sharing needles or touching other drug-related equipment that may have infected blood on it

Hepatitis C is NOT SPREAD by:

- kissing or hugging
- coughing or sneezing
- using the same dishes
- touching a person's skin

How could my baby get Hepatitis C?

If you have the Hepatitis C virus when your baby is born, you can pass the virus to your baby. No treatment can prevent this from happening. The chance of getting Hepatitis C is low, about 5%. The risk is higher if you are infected with HIV or have chronic liver disease. Birth by caesarian section would not lower the risk of your baby getting the virus.

It is also possible that your baby could get Hepatitis C if he or she is exposed to blood from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C in babies?

Most babies who have Hepatitis C do not have symptoms at birth. They do not usually get sick right away. The virus can stay in your baby's liver for many years before any symptoms develop. Although they appear healthy, they will have this infection for life.

How will I know if my baby has Hepatitis C?

Two blood tests can help to find out if your baby has Hepatitis C.

- A “PCR test” checks for the Hepatitis C virus in the blood. This test may be done when your baby is 2 or 3 weeks old.
- An “antibody test” checks for antibodies made in response to the virus. This test is usually done when your baby is more than 18 months old.

Why the delay?

If you have Hepatitis C, your antibodies may have passed to your baby during pregnancy or birth. They can stay in your baby's blood for up to 18 months. Therefore the antibody test is not recommended until after this time when your antibodies have gone.

Can my baby be protected from Hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to protect your baby from getting Hepatitis C.

Can I breastfeed my baby?

Yes, you can breastfeed your baby. There is no evidence that the Hepatitis C virus can spread by breastfeeding.

**If you have any questions about Hepatitis C,
please talk with your baby's nurse or doctor.**