

Mother-to-Child Transmission

Alan Franciscus

The chances of a infant or baby getting hepatitis C from its mother is low – most studies have only found that about 4% or 5% of babies (that’s 4 or 5 babies out of 100) born to hepatitis C infected mothers are infected with hepatitis C. The infection happens during the birth of the baby, and is called perinatal transmission.

About 240,000 children in the United States are believed to have hepatitis C infection. The majority of the infections occurred because babies and children received blood transfusions before the blood supply was screened for hepatitis C. Now the blood supply is considered safe – rarely do people become infected with hepatitis C by receiving a blood transfusion. But mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis C still occurs even though the risk of the baby getting HCV from the mother is low.

Increased Risk of Transmission

The risk increases if the mother has HIV or hepatitis B. It is also believed that the baby has a higher chance of getting hepatitis C if the mother has a lot of the hepatitis C virus in her blood – called having a high viral load – during pregnancy and time of birth. However, the causal relationship between viral load and perinatal transmission needs to be studied more before we can really understand it.

Breastfeeding

The good news is that hepatitis C cannot be spread by breastfeeding a baby. The only caution is that mothers need to make sure that their nipples are not cracked or bleeding because they could provide a possible route of infection – although there has never been a proven case of this happening.

Prevention During Pregnancy

It is also important that people understand that a woman who is pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant cannot take the medicines to treat hepatitis C because the hepatitis C medicines can cause the baby to get birth defects and become very sick. In fact if someone is on hepatitis C medications both partners have to practice two forms of birth control to prevent the chance of the woman becoming pregnant and harming the baby.

Testing

Testing for hepatitis C in a woman who is having a baby is not usually done. So if a person thinks they may have hepatitis C they should ask the doctor or nurse for a test.

A baby born to a woman with hepatitis C will generally not be tested for 12 to 18 months after birth. This is because the baby will have the mother's antibodies (proteins the body makes against a virus like hepatitis C), in its blood. Also many babies will get rid of hepatitis C naturally. The 12 to 18 month time period is usually how long it takes before the baby can naturally get rid of the mother's antibodies and is a good period of time to find out if the baby's own immune system is able to fight off and get rid of hepatitis C.

Hep C and Pregnancy

The good news is that it doesn't appear that pregnancy is affected by the hepatitis C virus. In other words, studies have not found that hepatitis C causes a risk for having problems with pregnancy.

Because the risk of passing hepatitis C to a baby is so low and also because hepatitis C does not create any problems during pregnancy, most experts will advise a woman that it is 'ok' to become pregnant.

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