

a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

Mother-to-Child Transmission

Alan Franciscus, Editor-in-Chief

It is estimated that approximately 240,000 children in the United States have been infected with the hepatitis C virus. Before blood was screened for hepatitis C in 1992, the majority of HCV transmission among children was caused by blood transfusions or blood products. Today, most new HCV infections in children occur in children born to HCV infected mothers.

Risk of Transmission

Although, the risk of HCV transmission from mother to child varies widely, most experts estimate the chance of an HCV positive mother transmitting the virus to her infant at about 4-5%. Some research has shown that the risk of transmission from the mother to the infant is higher if the HCV positive mother has a high viral load, but more studies are needed to confirm this. The chance of passing HCV from mother to child seems to increase if the mother is also infected with hepatitis B or HIV. There is no evidence that the HCV genotype or the mode of delivery (vaginal vs. cesarean) increases or decreases the vertical, or “mother-to-child” transmission of HCV.

Breastfeeding

There is no evidence that breastfeeding transmits hepatitis C. However, it is recommended that if a woman’s nipples are cracked or bleeding that mothers refrain from breastfeeding their infants.

Testing

Testing an infant for hepatitis C is complicated since the mother’s hepatitis C antibody will be passed to the child. In addition an infant is more likely than an adult to clear the virus on its own especially within the first year. Therefore, it is recommended that testing for the hepatitis C antibody should not begin for 12 to 18 months. If an earlier diagnosis is desired, an HCV RNA (viral load) test can be performed at 1 to 2 months after birth. However, the results should be viewed with caution since it has been found that a baby’s viral load may fluctuate in the early or acute phase of infection, and thus retesting may be required.

Risk to Pregnancy

Fortunately, if the mother has hepatitis C, it does not seem to result in a higher risk to the pregnancy.

Should Pregnancy Be Avoided?

Most experts would advise a woman that it is ‘ok’ to become pregnant, but counsel the woman that even though the risk is low, there is a possibility that the virus could be passed on to her infant.

Preventive Measures

Unfortunately, there are no preventive measures to reduce the risk of passing HCV from an HCV positive mother to her infant. Current medications to treat hepatitis C cause birth defects.

For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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