



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ093
PREGNANCY

Hepatitis B in Pregnancy

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What is hepatitis B virus?

Hepatitis B virus is one of a number of hepatitis viruses that attack and damage the liver. Other types include hepatitis A, hepatitis C, and hepatitis D. The liver is an organ located at the upper-right side of your abdomen.

How is hepatitis B transmitted?

Hepatitis B virus is passed from person to person by way of infected body fluids. These body fluids include the following:

- Blood
- Semen
- Vaginal fluids
- Saliva

The virus can be spread through sexual contact. The virus also can be passed by contact with the blood of an infected person. This may occur during childbirth or by sharing needles used to inject drugs.

What happens in the body as a result of hepatitis B virus infection?

The virus infects the liver and can cause a disease called hepatitis. Hepatitis can be a long-term, chronic disease. It also can be life threatening. Persons with chronic hepatitis have a greater chance of getting certain types of liver disease, such as **cirrhosis** (hardening) of the liver and cancer of the liver.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

The symptoms of hepatitis include the following:

- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Dark urine

- Soreness in the liver
- Muscle aches

Does the virus affect everyone the same way?

Most people who get hepatitis become immune to it after the disease runs its course. At this point, they can no longer pass it on to someone else.

Some people infected with the virus show no sign of infection. Such people are called carriers. They still can pass the virus to someone else although they have no symptoms. A woman who is a carrier can pass the virus to her baby at birth. Carriers sometimes become sick later.

How does hepatitis affect pregnancy?

When a pregnant woman is infected with hepatitis B virus, there is a chance she may infect her fetus. Whether the baby will get the virus depends on when infection occurs. If infection occurs early in pregnancy, the chances are less than 10% that the baby will get the virus. If infection occurs late in pregnancy, there is up to a 90% chance the baby will be infected.

Hepatitis may be severe in babies. It can threaten their lives. Even babies who appear well may be at risk of serious health problems.

Infected newborns have a high risk (up to 90%) of becoming carriers. They, too, can pass the virus to others. When they become adults, these carriers have a 25% risk of dying from cirrhosis or liver cancer.

Is there a test for hepatitis?

A blood test can show whether someone has been infected with hepatitis B virus. For the test, a small sample of blood is taken and tested for a special protein—called an **antigen**—that is found in blood infected with the virus.

A positive test result means that your children, your sexual partner(s), and others living in your household are at risk of infection. They should be told about testing and vaccination. They will need to decide whether to have them done.

If you are pregnant, you should be tested for the virus. The test should be done early enough in pregnancy to allow time to prepare treatment for the baby and test family members if your test result is positive.

Can hepatitis B virus infection be prevented?

There are steps you can take to reduce the risk of becoming infected with hepatitis B virus:

- Use condoms during sex
- Do not share needles used to inject drugs.

Another way to prevent infection is to get the hepatitis B virus vaccine. The vaccine is safe for use during pregnancy. The vaccine will not help people who already are infected.

In some cases, your health care provider also may give you **hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG)**. It contains **antibodies** to the virus. This will protect you against the virus until the vaccine triggers your body to make its own antibodies. HBIG also can be used in pregnancy.

Who should be vaccinated against hepatitis B?

All infants should get the hepatitis B virus vaccine. If you are pregnant and have the virus, your baby will receive HBIG soon after birth. Your baby also will receive the first dose of vaccine. Two more doses of the vaccine will be given later—one at 1 month and one at 6 months of age. This plan is 95% effective in protecting babies from becoming hepatitis B virus carriers.

Glossary

Antibodies: Proteins found in the blood produced in reaction to foreign substances, such as bacteria and viruses that cause infection.

Antigen: A substance, such as an organism causing infection or a protein found on the surface of blood cells, that can induce an immune response and cause the production of an antibody.

Cirrhosis: A disease caused by loss of liver cells, which are replaced by scar tissue that impairs liver function.

Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG): A substance given to provide temporary protection against infection with hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B Virus: A virus that attacks and damages the liver, causing inflammation, cirrhosis, and chronic hepatitis that can lead to cancer.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ093: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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