

Protect your newborn from hepatitis B virus



What is hepatitis B virus?

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is a virus that causes infection and inflammation of the liver. HBV infection can cause short-term illness leading to fever, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, jaundice and pain in the muscles and joints. HBV infection can potentially lead to lifelong illness with serious complications including liver damage (cirrhosis), liver cancer and even death.

Why does my newborn need protection against hepatitis B virus?

HBV can be passed from an infected mother to her baby at birth. In the United States, an estimated 25,000 pregnant mothers infected with hepatitis B give birth each year. Approximately 1,000 of the infected mothers will transmit HBV to their infant. Without medical intervention, as many as 9 in 10 infants who contract hepatitis B from their mother will become chronically infected. Sadly, 1 in 4 who are infected as children will die prematurely of serious complications related to their infection.

In Texas, pregnant women are routinely tested for HBV at their first prenatal visit and at delivery. Even if a pregnant woman tests negative at the start of pregnancy, there is still a chance for her to develop HBV infection later in pregnancy, placing her infant at risk. In some cases, HBV tests can fail to register an infection, often because the infection is new. This can lead to a false-negative test result where the heightened risk of HBV infection goes unrecognized. For this reason, all newborns should be vaccinated even when a mother tests negative for HBV at delivery to provide the best protection from HBV infection.

Infants and children can also come in contact with HBV later in life. HBV can live on common household surfaces for weeks, posing a risk to children in these households. Many infected people are unaware they have hepatitis B.

How can hepatitis B be prevented in my newborn?

Hepatitis B vaccine (HepB) is the best protection against hepatitis B for your newborn. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends all newborns get vaccinated within 24 hours after birth, at 1-2 months, and at 6-18 months. In addition to vaccination, newborns of mothers who test positive for hepatitis B should receive an antibody injection called Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG) at birth, along with future monitoring for infection.

Is it safe?

The ingredients in the HepB vaccine are very safe. The HepB vaccine that your newborn will receive does not contain thimerosal, a common vaccine preservative used in the past. An extremely small amount of aluminum is added to the vaccine to create an immune response. The HepB vaccine has been recommended for all U.S. newborns since 1991 and has been proven safe through decades of research and monitoring by pediatric and public health experts. The most common side effect of the vaccine is soreness or redness at the injection site.

Is it effective?

Yes, HepB vaccines are highly effective in preventing HBV infection. Research shows that among healthy people who receive the HepB vaccine series as recommended during infancy, immunity can last for over 30 years.

If you have any questions about hepatitis B virus or HepB vaccine, please talk to your child's doctor.