

Perinatal Hepatitis B

Frequently Asked Questions

What is perinatal hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver. In some people, the infection can become lifelong and lead to serious liver disease. Perinatal hepatitis B refers to hepatitis B infection passed from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids from an infected person enter another person's body. This can happen through:

- Birth (from an infected mother to her baby during vaginal or cesarean delivery)
- Sexual contact with an infected partner
- Sharing items that may have blood on them, such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, needles and syringes, or glucose meters
- Direct contact with infected blood or open sores
- Exposure to blood from needlestick injuries or other sharp instruments

Babies and children can also be exposed through:

- Close contact with an infected household member or caregiver
- Pre-chewed food given to an infant by an infected person
- Ear-piercing or tattooing equipment that has not been properly sterilized

Hepatitis B is not spread through casual contact such as sharing utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing.

A person with hepatitis B who breastfeeds does not increase the risk of transmission to the baby. Breastfeeding is considered safe, provided that nipple care is maintained to prevent cracking or bleeding.

Why should pregnant people be concerned about hepatitis B?

Many people with hepatitis B do not have symptoms and may not know they are infected. Without testing, they can unknowingly pass the virus to their baby during birth.

Infants are at especially high risk. If infected at birth and not protected by vaccination, about 9 in 10 infants will develop a chronic lifelong infection, which can lead to serious liver disease or death later in life.

What can perinatal hepatitis B be prevented?

Prevention focuses on testing and immediate newborn protection:

- All pregnant people should be tested for hepatitis B during each pregnancy.
- All newborns should receive the hepatitis B vaccine within 24 hours of birth.
- Babies born to mothers with hepatitis B should receive:
 - The hepatitis B vaccine and
 - Hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) within 12 hours of birth (as soon as possible after delivery)

Together, these steps greatly reduce the risk of infection.

If the mother doesn't have hepatitis B, does the baby still need to receive the hepatitis B vaccine?

Yes. All babies should receive the hepatitis B vaccine within 24 hours of birth. This provides early protection against possible exposure from others who may not know they are infected. It also serves as a safeguard against testing errors or unrecognized infection.

Won't my baby just recover from hepatitis B?

No. Babies are much less able than adults to clear the virus. About 9 out of 10 infants infected in the first year of life develop chronic infection. However, hepatitis B is highly preventable through vaccination at birth.

Should adults receive the hepatitis B vaccine series?

The hepatitis B vaccine is routinely recommended for all children in the United States and for adults at increased risk, including:

- People living with someone who has hepatitis B
- Health care and public safety workers who are exposed to blood
- Adults with certain medical conditions, including diabetes
- Individuals with higher-risk sexual behaviors
- Men who have sex with men
- People who inject drugs
- Travelers to certain countries with higher hepatitis B rates

Adults should talk with their health care provider about whether vaccination is appropriate for them.

Where can I get more information on chickenpox?

- Health care providers
- Local health departments: localhealth.nj.gov
- New Jersey Department of Health: nj.gov/health
- American Academy of Pediatrics: hepatitis B vaccine

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.