

Frequently Asked Questions

What is perinatal hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is caused by a virus that infects a person's liver. The hepatitis B virus can stay in a person's body for his or her life and cause serious liver problems. Hepatitis B can be transmitted from an infected mother to her baby during birth. This is called **perinatal hepatitis B**.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids infected with hepatitis B virus enters a person's body. People can become infected with hepatitis B through:

- Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth, which can happen during a vaginal delivery or a C-section)
- Sex with an infected partner
- Sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, needles and syringes, and glucose meters with an infected person
- Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- Exposure to blood from needlesticks or other sharp instruments

Babies and children can also get hepatitis B in the following ways:

- Close contact with an infected family member, caregiver, or friend
- From food that was chewed (for a baby) by an infected person
- From ear piercing needles that were not cleaned well

Hepatitis B virus is *not* spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing.

A woman with hepatitis B who chooses to breastfeed her infant does *not* increase the infant's chance of getting hepatitis B infection. Although there is no need to delay breastfeeding, all mothers should be educated on proper nipple care to prevent cracking and bleeding.

Why should pregnant women be concerned about hepatitis B?

Many women do not know they are infected, since people with hepatitis B often have no symptoms. Unfortunately, some of these women are not tested and can unknowingly pass the virus on to their babies.

Babies are less able to fight hepatitis B infection than older children or adults. Infants who are infected at birth or during childhood and who are not protected by vaccination have up to a 90% chance of developing a life-long chronic infection, which can lead to serious liver disease—or death—even as young as adolescence or as young adults.

What can be done to prevent perinatal hepatitis B?

All women should be tested during each pregnancy to determine if they have hepatitis B. In addition, all babies should receive the hepatitis B vaccine within 24 hours of birth. Babies born to mothers infected with hepatitis B will also need to receive the hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) shot within 12 hours of birth.

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 shot acts as a safety net, reducing the risk of getting the disease from moms or family members who may not know they are infected with the virus. Giving the birth dose to all infants can also prevent perinatal transmission when errors in medical testing occur. The vaccine is recommended for all babies so that they will be protected from a serious but preventable disease.

Won't my baby just recover from hepatitis B?

Babies are not able to fight off hepatitis B as well as adults. About 9 out of 10 babies who get infected in the first year of life will stay infected for life. The good news is that hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccination.

Should adults receive the hepatitis B vaccine series?

The vaccine is recommended for children in the United States and is recommended for high-risk adults. This includes people living with someone infected with hepatitis B, travelers to certain countries, and healthcare and public safety workers exposed to blood. People with high-risk sexual behaviors, men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, and people who have certain medical conditions, including diabetes, should talk to their doctor about getting vaccinated.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe. The most common side effect is soreness at the injection site or slight fever. Serious side effects are rare.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health
<http://www.nj.gov/health/cd/vpdp/shtlml>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HBV/index.htm>
- Immunization Action Coalition
<http://www.immunize.org>