



Hepatitis B Guidelines for Pregnant Women

What is hepatitis B? Hepatitis B is the most common serious liver infection in the world. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV) that attacks liver cells and can lead to liver failure, cirrhosis (scarring) or cancer of the liver later in life. The virus is transmitted through contact with infected blood and bodily fluids.

If I am pregnant, should I be tested for hepatitis B? Yes! Pregnant women who are infected with hepatitis B can transmit the virus to their newborns during pregnancy or delivery. Almost 90% of these babies will become chronically infected with hepatitis B at birth if there is no prevention.



ALL pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B to prevent infection.

What if I test positive for hepatitis B while I am pregnant? If a pregnant woman tests positive for hepatitis B, then she should be referred to a liver specialist for further evaluation. Although most women do not have any pregnancy complications as a result of HBV infection, it is still a good idea to be seen by a specialist.



How can I protect my newborn from hepatitis B? If a pregnant woman tests positive for hepatitis B, her newborn child must be given two shots in the delivery room - the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine and one dose of hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG). If these two medications are given correctly within the first 12 hours of life, a newborn has a 95% chance of being protected against a lifelong hepatitis B infection. The infant will need additional doses of hepatitis B vaccine at one and six months of age to provide complete protection. If a woman knows that she is infected, it is important that she tell her doctor to have these two drugs available when she is ready to deliver. **If a baby does not receive these drugs in time, then there is a greater than 90% possibility that he or she will become chronically infected. There is no second chance!**

It is vitally important that all newborns be vaccinated at birth against hepatitis B!



Can I breastfeed my baby if I am infected with hepatitis B? According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), it is safe for an infected woman to breastfeed her child. All women with hepatitis B are encouraged to breastfeed their babies since the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the potential risk of transmitting the virus through breast milk. In addition, since all newborns should receive the hepatitis B vaccine at birth, the risk of transmission is reduced even further.

How will I know if I am infected with hepatitis B? The test that is used to help you understand your hepatitis B status is called the hepatitis B blood panel, a simple three-part blood test that your doctor can order. All pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B.

The 3-part hepatitis B blood panel includes the following:

- 1. Hepatitis B Surface Antigen (HBsAg):** The “surface antigen” is part of the hepatitis B virus that is found in the blood of someone who is infected. If this test is positive, then the hepatitis B virus is present.
- 2. Hepatitis B Surface Antibody (HBsAb or anti-HBs):** The “surface antibody” is formed in response to the hepatitis B virus. Your body can make this antibody if you have been vaccinated, or if you have recovered from a hepatitis B infection. If this test is positive, then your immune system has successfully developed a protective antibody against the hepatitis B virus. This will provide long-term protection against future hepatitis B infection.
- 3. Hepatitis B Core Antibody (HBcAb or anti-HBc):** This antibody *does not* provide any protection or immunity against the hepatitis B virus. A positive test indicates that a person may have been exposed to the hepatitis B virus. This test is often used by blood banks to screen blood donations. However, all three test results are needed to make a diagnosis.

How do I protect my child if another family member is infected with hepatitis B? Babies and children can be exposed to HBV from an infected dad, sibling, or other family member living in the same household. This can occur through contact with infected blood and bodily fluids. Vaccination is the best prevention against spreading the hepatitis B virus!



How can I prevent getting hepatitis B if someone in my household is infected? We recommend that anyone living in a household with an infected family member should be vaccinated. This is especially important for babies and children since they are at greatest risk for developing a chronic infection if exposed to HBV at an early age. The vaccine is a series of three shots given over a six-month period that will provide a lifetime of protection.

Until your vaccine series is complete, it is important to avoid sharing any sharp instruments such as razors, toothbrushes, or earrings, etc. since small amounts of blood can be exchanged through these items. Also, infected individuals should be careful to keep all cuts properly covered. Blood spills should be cleaned with gloves and a 10% bleach/water solution. Hepatitis B is not transmitted casually and it cannot be spread through sneezing, coughing, hugging, or eating food prepared by someone who is infected with Hepatitis B.

Remember that the best protection for you and your loved ones is the hepatitis B vaccine. Over 1 billion doses of the vaccine have been given worldwide, making it the most widely used vaccine in the world!

For more information, please visit:

- Hepatitis B Foundation at www.hepb.org
- Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
- National Immunization Program at www.cdc.gov/nip
- Immunization Action Coalition at www.immunize.org
- Parents Of Kids with Infectious Diseases (PKIDs) at www.pkids.org