

Hepatitis B and Childbirth

It's important to note that the infection of Hepatitis is a worldwide problem affecting many parents and children and therefore should be taken seriously. But it is important to understand what some of the statistics mean.

Hepatitis B is a bloodborne pathogen, meaning it is contracted when blood from an infected person comes in contact with blood from another person. This is how it is transmissible at birth, when blood from an infected mother comes in contact with blood from her baby. But, for this to happen the mother has to have Hepatitis B.

Although it is administered routinely, if you do not have Hepatitis B and are not at risk of contracting it, it may not be necessary for your baby to receive this vaccine at birth. Those at risk are generally those with multiple sex partners, those in the healthcare industry that come in contact with blood and do not exercise universal precautions, or perhaps those who have been in a vulnerable situation where the presence of Hepatitis B may have been prevalent.

“A woman who is chronically infected with hepatitis B cannot infect her baby in the womb during gestation. The hepatitis B virus also cannot be spread through breast feeding or saliva. However, during labor, the newborn will come into contact with the mother's blood and be exposed to the virus, risking infection. Precautions do exist to help protect these babies from contracting the virus at this time, with great results.

Every year in the United States, over 24,000 infants are born to mothers who are chronically infected. If measures are not taken to protect these newborns, 10% of them will contract the virus. Because of their undeveloped immune systems, only 10% of those infected will be able to clear the disease, meaning approximately 90% may become chronically infected and be put at lifelong risk for liver cancer or cirrhosis, making it vitally important to prevent infection during childbirth. In comparison, only about 2-6% of adults who contract the virus will develop a chronic infection. The others will suffer from the acute disease and its symptoms for up to six months, and then will clear the virus and gain immunity. At the Perinatal Hepatitis B Program, we make sure that all babies born to HBV positive mothers are given the proper treatments to prevent infection from the exposure to the virus during birth.

As part of the recommended immunization schedule for infants, most all babies born in the United States are routinely given a dose of Hepatitis B vaccine the day they are born and will receive 2-3 more doses throughout infancy. This is enough to ensure lifelong protection from the virus. For babies born to HBV positive mothers, it is especially important that babies receive their first dose within 12 hours of birth. Additionally, these babies will receive a shot of Hepatitis B Immunoglobulin (also called HBIG), which provides the infant with immediate protection from the virus by helping their immune system prevent infection.”

Excerpt taken from: <https://acphd.org/perinatal-hepatitis-b-prevention/childbirth/>

A simple breakdown of the statistics in the USA each year can be seen below:

In one year 3.66 million births take place in the USA (3,660,000)

Of those births 24,000 infected mothers will give birth

Of those births 240 infants will become infected/carriers

Of those babies infected 24 will clear the disease and remain healthy

The remaining 216 will become chronically infected and be at risk for liver cancer or cirrhosis later in life.

So, of the 3,660,000 births that take place each year, 216 babies will be chronically infected with Hepatitis B.

So, the big questions for each mother are these...

Am I infected with Hepatitis B?

Do I live a lifestyle or work a job that puts me at significant risk of contracting Hepatitis B?

And, understanding the statistics, do I want my baby to receive the Hepatitis B Vaccine at birth?