PREGNANCY AND HEPATITIS C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV). This virus is spread when infected blood enters the blood stream of an uninfected person. Hepatitis C is a serious disease which can result in inflammation, scarring, liver cancer, and even death.

Many people living with Hepatitis C do not know they are infected because of a lack of symptoms. Even if someone does not feel sick, damage may still be happening to their liver.

Pregnancy and Hepatitis C

Thankfully, the risk of a mother transmitting Hepatitis C to her baby is very low, about a 6% chance. More research needs to be done to truly understand how and when babies are infected with the virus.

What we do know is:

- The risk is the same for a baby born vaginally or by C-Section.
- The risk can be as high as 20% if you also have untreated HIV.
- The higher your viral load, the higher the risk.
- Some mothers experience increased itching which is a symptom of added stress to the liver during pregnancy.

Breastfeeding and Hepatitis C

Breastfeeding does not increase the risk of Hepatitis C transmission from mother to baby. Breast milk does contain small amounts of the Hepatitis C Virus, but it is believed that the acids in a baby's stomach quickly destroy the virus. The only time it is dangerous to breastfeed your baby is if there is cracking or bleeding around the nipples. Because Hepatitis C is present in blood, it is important to pump and dump until the bleeding has stopped and the breastmilk is clear.

Most doctors believe the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the unproven danger. You should have a conversation with your doctor if you are concerned or need more information.

Testing for Hepatitis C

There are two tests doctors use to determine if someone has Hepatitis C—an antibody test and a viral load test. An antibody is produced by your immune system when it detects a harmful substance like bacteria, fungi, parasites, and viruses. Think of an antibody like an army made by your immune system specific to a harmful substance. **A Hepatitis C antibody test**, looks for an antibody to the Hepatitis C Virus to check if you have ever been infected with Hepatitis C. In adults with Hepatitis C, even when the virus is gone, they will always test positive for the antibody.

A Viral Load test looks for the genetic material (RNA) of the Hepatitis C Virus. This test shows whether or not the virus is actively present in your blood.

Testing Your Little One

During the last few months of pregnancy, mothers pass their antibodies on to their babies, helping them to begin building their immune system. Babies will also receive antibodies from their mothers through breast milk. The antibodies we inherit from our mothers do not last forever.

The Hepatitis C virus, like any other virus, leads our immune system to create antibodies. A baby may test positive for the Hepatitis C antibody at birth but not be infected with the virus; the antibodies in the baby may have come from the infected mother, not from the child. Additionally, a viral load test may not be sensitive enough to detect the small amounts of virus in the baby's blood during the first few months of birth.

Children are more likely than adults to clear the Hepatitis C infection on their own. Some children will even clear the Hepatitis C infection in in the first three years of life. Due to shared antibodies, low viral load, and children's abilities to clear the virus, you may want to wait until after a baby is 18 months old to test for antibodies. By then, the mother's antibodies should have been cleared and the results will be more reliable.

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