Hantaviruses

This sheet is about having a hantavirus in pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider

What are hantaviruses?

Hantaviruses are a group of viruses found around the world that can cause serious illness and sometimes death. Hantaviruses that are typically found in the Americas, including the Andes virus and Sin Nombre virus, can cause flu-like symptoms that can develop into hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS), a severe lung disease. Hantaviruses that are more commonly found in Europe and Asia can cause hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome (HFRS), which can damage blood vessels and kidneys.

The most common way to get a hantavirus is through direct contact with rodents. Wild mice and rats are the primary carriers, but the virus can also be spread by chipmunks, ground squirrels, gophers, and rodents kept as pets. People can get infected by touching rodent urine, droppings (poop), or saliva, or by breathing in contaminated air when these materials are stirred up. Less commonly, hantaviruses can spread through rodent bites and scratches.

The Andes virus is the only hantavirus known to spread from person to person. This can happen through close contact with someone who is sick, such as direct physical contact, spending time together in close or enclosed spaces, or contact with the person's body fluids. Infection can also happen by touching an object or surface with the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

What are the symptoms of hantavirus infection?

Symptoms of hantavirus infection usually start 1 to 8 weeks after exposure to the virus. Early symptoms can include fever, chills, muscle aches, headache, tiredness, dizziness, abdominal (stomach) pain, diarrhea, and/or vomiting. Four to 10 days later, people can start to experience symptoms of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS) that include cough, chest tightness, and trouble breathing. Symptoms of HPS can be severe and sometimes lead to death.

Symptoms of hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome (HFRS) usually start 1 to 2 weeks after exposure to the virus, although symptoms might start as late as 8 weeks after exposure. Early symptoms of HFRS can include headache, fever, chills, back pain, abdominal (stomach) pain, nausea, and blurred vision. Sometimes, people can have flushing (redness) of the face, red eyes, and rash. Later symptoms of HFRS can include low blood pressure, problems with blood flow, internal bleeding, and kidney failure. In some cases, HFRS can cause death.

In pregnancy, symptoms and outcomes of hantavirus infection can vary depending on the specific hantavirus. Although information is limited, pregnant women might be more likely to experience worse symptoms and have poorer outcomes (like severe disease and death) from a hantavirus infection compared to women who are not pregnant. Since hantavirus can cause serious illness, women who are pregnant and have hantavirus should receive medical care right away. Symptoms of hantavirus can be treated, but there is no vaccine or cure for HPS or HFRS.

How can I protect my pregnancy from hantaviruses?

Women who are pregnant should avoid contact with rodents and their urine, droppings, and nesting materials. This includes pet rodents like mice, rats, and hamsters. If there are mice or rats in the home (pests), it is important to have the home treated and to safely clean up any droppings or bedding. CDC has helpful tips about rodent control and cleanup here: https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-pets/rodent-control/clean-up.html.

CDC also has tips to lower the chance of infection if someone around you has the Andes virus. These include washing hands often, not sharing drinks, cigarettes, or utensils (like forks or spoons), keeping physical distance from the infected person, avoiding kissing, and not having sex with them. More information is available here: https://www.cdc.gov/hantavirus/about/andesvirus.html.

How can I find out if I am infected with a hantavirus?

A blood test can be done to see if a person is infected with a hantavirus. The test might not be able to detect the virus during the first 72 hours (3 days) of infection. Repeating the blood test 72 hours after symptoms begin is often recommended. If you suspect a hantavirus infection, talk with a healthcare provider immediately and mention any

possible exposure to rodents.

I have a hantavirus. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?
It is not known if having a hantavirus can make it harder to get pregnant. Hantavirus infection can be very serious and may temporarily affect overall health and reproductive health during recovery. Because hantavirus can affect the lungs, kidneys, and other organs, it is important to talk with a healthcare provider before trying to get pregnant, especially if the illness was recent or severe.

Does having a hantavirus increase the chance of miscarriage?
Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Studies have not been done to see if hantaviruses can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does having a hantavirus increase the chance of birth defects?
Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like a hantavirus, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. It is not known if hantaviruses can increase the chance of birth defects.

Fever is a possible symptom of HPS and HFRS. A high fever in the first trimester can increase the chance of certain birth defects. Acetaminophen has been recommended to reduce fever in pregnancy. If you get sick with a hantavirus or any other illness and develop a fever, talk with your healthcare provider to confirm if taking acetaminophen is okay for you. For more information about fever and pregnancy, see the MotherToBaby fact sheet about hyperthermia at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/hyperthermia-pregnancy/.

Does having a hantavirus increase the chance of other pregnancy related problems?
It is not known if hantaviruses can cause other pregnancy-related problems, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2,500 grams] at birth). There are case reports of preterm birth and fetal death following hantavirus infection in pregnancy.

One case report suggested that a hantavirus might have passed from a woman to her fetus during pregnancy (called vertical transmission). However, since the infant was not tested until 15 days after delivery, it is possible that the baby was infected after birth and not during the pregnancy. No vertical transmission of hantavirus was reported in 12 other case reports.

Does having a hantavirus in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?
Studies have not been done to see if hantaviruses can increase the chance of behavior or learning issues for the child.

Breastfeeding while I have a hantavirus:
There is limited information about hantaviruses and breastfeeding. One case report described a baby who became infected with hantavirus after being breastfed by a woman with HPS. The virus was found in the woman's breast milk, although other sources of infection for the baby could not be ruled out. Since some hantaviruses can spread through close contact and body fluids, women who are infected while breastfeeding should take precautions (such as limiting close contact) to not spread the virus to the nursing baby and others.

It is important to check in regularly with a pediatrician and healthcare team for updated guidance while breastfeeding during or after a hantavirus infection. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man has a hantavirus, can it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?
Studies have not been done to see if hantaviruses could affect men's fertility (ability to make healthy sperm) or increase the chance of birth defects. Since some hantaviruses may be passed from person to person through close contact including sexual intercourse, infected men should take precautions to not spread the virus to a pregnant partner. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.

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