Hepatitis A

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

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is an infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). Hepatitis A spreads among people very easily. The virus infects the liver. It generally takes 15 to 50 days to develop the illness after coming into contact with HAV.

Symptoms of hepatitis A can include fatigue (being very tired), nausea, vomiting, fever, abdominal pain, dark colored urine, flu-like symptoms, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Symptoms tend to be mild in children, but they can be more serious in people who get the infection for the first time as adults. Unlike other forms of hepatitis, hepatitis A does not cause chronic (long-term) liver problems.

How do you get hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A virus spreads through contact with the feces of, or through sexual contact with, an infected person. Common sources of infection include contaminated cooking/eating utensils, contaminated toys, and contaminated food and water. People working in childcare settings or living in households with affected family members have an increased chance of getting the virus. Hepatitis A is the most common cause of jaundice in woman who are pregnant.

How can I lower the chance of getting hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A vaccine provides the best protection against the virus. MotherToBaby has a fact sheet on the hepatitis A vaccine at: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/hepatitis-a-vaccine/.

In addition, practicing good hygiene can lower the chance of infection. This includes washing hands with soap and water after using the bathroom, after changing a diaper, and before preparing and eating food. Boiling contaminated food or water for one minute can kill the virus.

I have hepatitis A. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?

It is not known if having hepatitis A can make it harder to get pregnant. It is possible that being ill could temporarily affect your menstrual cycle.

Does having hepatitis A increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Having hepatitis A is not expected to increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does having hepatitis A during pregnancy 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 hepatitis A, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Studies have not shown an increased chance for birth defects following hepatitis A exposure in pregnancy.

Would having hepatitis A during pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy related problems?

Most women who get hepatitis A during pregnancy are not expected to have serious pregnancy-related complications. Studies have shown an increased chance of preterm labor (labor that begins before 37 weeks of pregnancy) following hepatitis A infection during pregnancy; this is more common when there is fever. Separation of the placenta (the organ that grows in the uterus during pregnancy) from the uterus has also been reported. There are rare reports of the virus passing to the developing baby and causing inflammation of the baby's liver after delivery (neonatal hepatitis).

Does having Hepatitis A in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Hepatitis A in pregnancy is not expected to cause long-term problems for the child.

Breastfeeding while I have hepatitis A:

Most woman who are nursing can continue to breastfeed while they have a hepatitis A infection. There are antibodies present in breast milk that might help protect the baby from getting an infection. The baby might need immune globulin shots for protection against the virus. Women who get hepatitis A while breastfeeding should practice good hand washing and other hygiene practices. They should also talk with their baby's healthcare provider about the best ways to protect the baby from the virus.

If a man has hepatitis A, can it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Studies have not been done to see if having hepatitis A could affect male fertility (ability to make healthy sperm) or increase the chance of birth defects. Partners cannot pass hepatitis A directly to a baby during pregnancy. However, an infected partner can pass the virus to the women who is pregnant through sexual contact, or by sharing food, drink, or utensils. Both partners should practice good hand washing and other hygiene. In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase the risk 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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