Hepatitis A and the Vaccine during Pregnancy

This sheet is about exposure to hepatitis A and the hepatitis A vaccine in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is hepatitis A?
Hepatitis A is a virus that spreads very easily and infects the liver. After coming in contact with the hepatitis A virus, it generally takes 15 to 50 days to develop the illness. Symptoms of infection include fatigue, 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 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 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 people who are pregnant.

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?
The hepatitis A vaccine contains an inactivated (not live) hepatitis A virus. The vaccine causes a person to develop antibodies to the virus and protects them against the virus in the future. The vaccine does not cause hepatitis A. The hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for all children at 1 year of age, and for individuals, including those who are pregnant, that are traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common. It is also recommended for some individuals working in professions with a high chance of exposure to the virus, and people who have other risk factors such as clotting disorders, chronic liver disease, or those who use certain drugs.

How can I lower the chance of getting hepatitis A?
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.

The hepatitis A vaccine provides the best protection against the virus. The vaccine is thought to be effective for up to 20 years. A blood test is available to find out if a person has hepatitis A antibodies. If they do not, they can talk with their healthcare provider about their risk factors for hepatitis A and decide if vaccination is right for them. People with recent exposure to the virus who have not been vaccinated can receive a hepatitis A immune globulin shot to reduce the chance of getting sick. The shot should be given as soon as possible within two weeks of the exposure.

Does having hepatitis A increase the chance for miscarriage?
Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Having hepatitis A is not expected to increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does having hepatitis A during pregnancy increase the chance of birth defects?
Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. Studies have not shown an increased chance for birth defects following hepatitis A exposure in pregnancy.

Would having hepatitis A during pregnancy cause pregnancy complications?
Most people who get hepatitis A during pregnancy, and their babies, do not experience serious complications. A few studies have shown an increased chance of preterm labor (labor that begins before 37 weeks of pregnancy) following hepatitis A infection during pregnancy. Problems with the placenta have 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 cause long-term problems?
Hepatitis A in pregnancy is not expected to cause long-term problems.

I got the hepatitis A vaccine before I knew I was pregnant. Does having the vaccine increase the chance of birth defects?

Inactivated vaccines like the hepatitis A vaccine are not thought to pose a risk to a developing baby. Several studies have not found negative effects on birth outcomes or child development following exposure to the hepatitis A vaccine in pregnancy. One study suggested a possible increased chance for babies to be small for gestational age. As with any exposure, be sure to discuss the possible risks and benefits with your healthcare provider.

Can I breastfeed while I have hepatitis A?

Most people who are nursing can continue to breastfeed while they have the hepatitis A infection. If they become very ill or jaundiced, they might need to stop breastfeeding until they recover. The baby may need immune globulin shots for protection against the virus. People who get hepatitis A while breastfeeding should practice good hand washing and other hygiene. They should also talk with their baby’s healthcare provider about the best ways to protect the baby from the virus.

Can I get the hepatitis A vaccine while breastfeeding?

Most people who are nursing and receive the hepatitis A vaccine can continue to breastfeed. Breastfeeding does not affect how well the vaccine works. Based on the data available, the is not expected to increase risks to the baby. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

I have Hepatitis A. Can it make it harder for me to get my partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defects?

Hepatitis A has not been studied for effects on fertility. Partners cannot pass hepatitis A directly to a baby during pregnancy. However, an infected partner can pass the virus to the person 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 fathers or sperm donors 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