Hepatitis A and the Vaccine during Pregnancy

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

What is hepatitis A? How is it spread?

Hepatitis A is a highly contagious virus that infects the liver. 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. Pregnant women working in childcare settings or living in households with affected family members are at increased risk for getting the virus. Hepatitis A is the most common cause of jaundice (yellowing of the skin) in pregnant women.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

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. 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 long-term (chronic) liver problems.

What is the hepatitis A vaccine?

The hepatitis A vaccine contains an inactivated (killed) 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 children (at age 1 year), and for pregnant and non-pregnant individuals traveling to countries where hepatitis A is common. It is also recommended for some individuals working in professions with a high risk of exposure to the virus, and people who have other risk factors such as clotting-factor disorders, chronic liver disease, or who use illegal 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. 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?

Having hepatitis A is not thought to increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does having hepatitis A during pregnancy increase the chance of birth defects or other pregnancy complications?
In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. Hepatitis A is not thought to increase the chance for birth defects. The infection might increase the chance of premature labor or problems with the placenta. There are rare reports of the virus passing to the developing baby and causing inflammation of the baby’s liver after delivery (neonatal hepatitis). But most women who get hepatitis A during pregnancy, and their babies, do not experience serious complications.

I’m not sure if I ever had hepatitis A or got the vaccine. Should I get the vaccine before becoming pregnant?

Once a person has had hepatitis A infection or gotten the vaccine, they develop antibodies. These antibodies protect against infection in the future, and most individuals will not develop hepatitis A again. Your health care provider can do a blood test to find out if you have hepatitis A antibodies. If you do not, you can talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for hepatitis A and decide if vaccination is right for you.

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

The hepatitis A vaccine has not been well-studied specifically in pregnancy, but inactivated vaccines are not thought to pose a risk to a developing baby. One small study showed no adverse effects on birth outcomes or child development from getting the hepatitis A vaccine in pregnancy. As with any medication or vaccination, be sure to discuss the possible risks and benefits with your health care provider.

Can I breastfeed if I have hepatitis A?

Nursing mothers can continue to breastfeed during hepatitis A infection. If the mother becomes very ill or jaundiced, she might need to stop breastfeeding until she recovers. The baby may need immunoglobulin shots for protection against the virus. If you get hepatitis A while breastfeeding be sure to practice good hand washing and other hygiene. Talk with your baby’s healthcare provider about the best ways to protect your baby from the virus.

Can I get the hepatitis A vaccine while breastfeeding?

Yes. Nursing mothers who receive the hepatitis A vaccine can continue to breastfeed. Breastfeeding does not affect how well the vaccine works in the mother.

If a man has hepatitis A, does it increase the chance of infertility or birth defects?

Hepatitis A has not been studied for effects on a man’s fertility. A father cannot pass hepatitis A directly to a baby during pregnancy. However, an infected man can pass the virus to the mother through sexual contact with her or by sharing food, drink, or utensils. Both partners should practice good hand washing and other hygiene. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/pdf/.

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