Mother-to-Child Transmission

**Risk of Transmission**

It is estimated that 40,000 babies are born to HCV-positive mothers each year. Although, the risk of HCV transmission from mother to child varies widely, most experts estimate the chance of an HCV-positive mother transmitting the virus to her infant at about 4 to 10%. Some research has shown that the risk of transmission from the mother to the infant is higher if the HCV-positive mother has a high viral load, but more studies are needed to confirm this. The chance of passing HCV from mother to child seems to increase if the mother is also infected with HIV. There is no evidence that the HCV genotype or the mode of delivery (vaginal vs. cesarean) increases or decreases the vertical, or “mother-to-child” transmission of HCV.

**Breastfeeding**

There is no evidence that breastfeeding transmits hepatitis C. However, it is recommended that if a woman’s nipples are cracked or bleeding that mothers refrain from breastfeeding their infants.

**Testing**

Testing an infant for hepatitis C is complicated since the mother’s hepatitis C antibody will be passed to the child. In addition an infant is more likely than an adult to clear the virus on its own especially within the first year. Therefore, it is recommended that testing for the hepatitis C antibody should not begin for 12 to 18 months. If an earlier diagnosis is desired, an HCV RNA (viral load) test can be performed at 1 to 2 months after birth. However, the results should be viewed...
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with caution since it has been found that a baby’s viral load may fluctuate in the early or acute phase of infection, and thus retesting will be required.

Risk to Pregnancy

Fortunately, if the mother has hepatitis C, it does not seem to result in a higher risk of complications to pregnancy.

Should Pregnancy Be Avoided?

Most experts would advise a woman that it is ‘ok’ to become pregnant, but counsel the woman that even though the risk is low, there is a possibility that the virus could be passed on to her infant.

Preventive Measures

Unfortunately, there are no preventive measures to reduce the risk of passing HCV from an HCV-positive mother to her infant. Current medications to treat hepatitis C cause birth defects.

Related publications:

- HCV Transmission and Prevention Overview
- Frequently Asked Questions about Sexual Transmission
  www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/sexFAQ.pdf
- How Long Does HCV Live on Surfaces and in Syringes?

For more information

- Americans with Disabilities Act
  www.ada.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  www.cdc.gov
- Hepatitis C Support Project
  www.hcvadvocate.org
- Mayo Clinic
  www.mayoclinic.com

Visit our websites to learn more about viral hepatitis:

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