



HEPATITIS C

Information, advice, testing,
support & training service

Before blood was screened for hepatitis C in 1992 the majority of HCV transmissions among children were caused by blood transfusions or blood products.

Today, most new HCV infections in children occur in children born to HCV infected mothers.

Risk of Transmission

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 5%.

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 type of delivery (vaginal vs. caesarean) increases or decreases the "mother-to-child" transmission of HCV.

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is generally not considered to be a risk factor for mother-to-child transmission of HCV, but there is a possibility of transmitting hepatitis C to a baby if the mother's nipples are cracked or bleeding.

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, a viral load test can be performed at 1 to 2 months after birth. However, caution should be used since it has been found that a baby's viral load may fluctuate in the early or acute phase of infection, and thus retesting may be required.

Risk to Pregnancy

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

Should Pregnancy Be Avoided?

Because the transmission rate of hepatitis C from mother to child is so low, women should not be counselled against becoming pregnant.

Preventive Measures

Unfortunately, there are no preventive measures to reduce the risk of passing HCV from an HCV positive mother to her infant.

REMEMBER Current medications to treat hepatitis C cause birth defects.