

Hepatitis B: What your positive screening test result means



Public Health
Agency

New information for babies
born from 1 July 2024

Your recent screening test has shown that you have an infection called hepatitis B.

This leaflet explains what hepatitis B is and the recommended care for you in pregnancy to keep you and your baby healthy.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. The virus can infect the liver and cause problems with your health including inflammation (swelling) of the liver. It can cause either acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term) illness, including cirrhosis (scarring) and cancer.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

Many people with hepatitis B infection have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. They may fight off the virus without realising they had it. If symptoms occur they tend to occur two to three months after exposure to the virus.

Symptoms include:

- flu-like symptoms (tiredness, fever and general aches and pains)
- loss of appetite
- feeling of being sick
- diarrhoea
- tummy (abdominal) pain
- yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

These usually pass within one to three months (acute hepatitis), but can occasionally last for six months or more (chronic hepatitis).

How is hepatitis spread?

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood or body fluids of an infected person. It is not spread by kissing, holding hands, hugging, coughing, sneezing, or sharing crockery and utensils.

It can be spread in the following ways:

- from mother to baby during pregnancy or birth
- during unprotected sex (without using a condom)
- sharing infected needles or drug equipment
- having a tattoo, body piercing, medical or dental treatment where unsterilised equipment was used
- by sharing toothbrushes or razors where there may be small amounts of blood found
- within families (child to child) due to exposure to infected blood.



How will my hepatitis B diagnosis affect my antenatal care or my baby's birth?

Your care will have input from both midwives and obstetricians, with some of your antenatal appointments in the hospital. You will also be referred to specialist services including hepatology and sexual health services (also known as Genitourinary Medicine or GUM clinics), and you will be offered extra blood tests and extra ultrasound scans in pregnancy. Hepatitis B does not affect the way your baby is born. It is not a reason on its own to have a caesarean birth.

Hepatology review

This appointment is with a hepatologist (liver specialist) in the Hepatology department (liver clinic) at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.

The liver specialist will carry out some tests to check the health of your liver and the amount of virus in your body. Depending on the results of your tests, you may be offered antiviral drugs later in your pregnancy. The drugs can lower the amount of virus in your body and reduce the chance of you passing the infection to your baby during birth.

It is very important that you attend your hepatology (liver clinic) appointment.

Even if you have attended hepatology before, it is important that you are reviewed again during your pregnancy. Speak to your antenatal screening coordinator if you haven't received an appointment.

Sexual health review

Hepatitis B can be transmitted within a household and through sexual contact so you will also be referred to your local sexual health clinic, who will offer you further sexual health screening if necessary and provide hepatitis B testing for your current sexual partner. If they test negative for hepatitis B, they will be offered hepatitis B vaccinations to protect them from the infection.

Your GP can organise testing and vaccination for other household members and children if necessary.

How to protect your baby?

Babies infected at birth or during the first year of life have a 9 in 10 (90%) chance of developing long-lasting (chronic) hepatitis B infection, which puts them at risk of developing serious liver disease as they grow older and they may also pass the infection on to others. However, by vaccinating the baby at birth and completing the recommended follow-on vaccination schedule, the risk is reduced to around 1 in 10 (10%).

Hepatitis B may be prevented by giving your baby a course of six hepatitis B vaccinations, starting at birth. The vaccine is given as a small injection into the thigh.

If you had high levels of the virus during your pregnancy, your baby will also be offered an additional injection called hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) just after they are born.

The second dose of single hepatitis B vaccine needs to be given at four weeks of age and this will be given either at a hospital clinic or by your GP.

The next four doses of hepatitis B are given in the 6 in 1 combined vaccination (Hexavalent vaccine containing diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis, Haemophilus influenzae type B, poliovirus and hepatitis B) routinely offered to all babies at two months, three months, four months and 18 months old. Your baby will have a blood test around their first birthday to ensure that they have not been infected with the hepatitis B virus. This will be at an appointment at a hospital clinic.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Vaccines against hepatitis work very well and are safe. You cannot get hepatitis B from being vaccinated.

Will it be safe to breastfeed my baby?

Yes, you can breastfeed safely providing your baby gets all their vaccinations. Although small amounts of the virus have been found in breastmilk, there have been no reports of babies becoming infected through breastfeeding.

If your nipples become cracked and bleed, we would advise you to stop breastfeeding temporarily until they have healed. You should ask your midwife or health visitor for support in ensuring correct positioning and attachment of the baby. Also ask about lactation support to learn how to maintain milk production and how to supplement with pasteurised donor human milk or formula when you have a pause in breastfeeding.

When you go home

Make sure your baby is registered at the local registration office as soon as they are born so that you can book them in for their vaccination at four weeks of age, if it is to be given by the GP (note some Trusts will provide the vaccinations at hospital appointments). Tell your midwife or health visitor if you have any problems with this.

Remember to take your 'red book' (your baby's personal child health record book) to all appointments.

It is important that your baby receives their full course of vaccinations as this will give them the best protection.

*For more information on the routine childhood immunisation programme, see the PHA leaflet *Immunisation for babies up to a year old* at: <http://pha.site/ImmunisationForBabies>

Who needs to know about you and your baby?

It is important, with your permission, that all healthcare professionals involved in your and your baby's care are aware of your diagnosis so that they can make sure you and your baby receive effective treatment.

Schedule

At birth	Single hepatitis B vaccination +/- HBIG given within 24 hours of birth.
1 month	Single hepatitis B vaccination given either at hospital appointment or by GP.
2 months	6 in 1 (Hexavalent vac) routine vaccination given by GP which includes hepatitis B.
3 months	6 in 1 (Hexavalent vac) routine vaccination given by GP which includes hepatitis B.
4 months	6 in 1 (Hexavalent vac) routine vaccination given by GP which includes hepatitis B.
12 months	Blood taken at a hospital appointment to test for hepatitis B infection.
18 months	6 in 1 (Hexavalent vac) routine vaccination given by GP which includes hepatitis B.

Useful information

Northern Ireland Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network
www.hepbandcni.net

British Liver Trust
6 Dean Park Crescent,
Bournemouth BH1 1HL
Helpline: 0800 652 7330 (10am to 3pm Mon to Fri)
General enquiries: 01425 481320
Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk
Website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk



www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/registering-and-naming-your-baby



www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/your-local-doctor-gp



www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/hepatitis-b-protecting-your-baby-english-and-15-translations



Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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