About the Parent Handout

Hepatitis B Shots Are Recommended for All New Babies

What is hepatitis B and why do I need to protect my baby now?
Hepatitis B is a serious disease cause by the hepatitis B virus. The virus can enter the bloodstream, attack the liver, and cause serious damage. When babies get infected, the virus usually remains in the body for a lifetime (it is called chronic hepatitis B). About 1 out of 20 infected babies will die of liver failure or liver cancer as adults. Hepatitis B is a deadly disease – but it’s preventable with vaccination.

How is hepatitis B virus spread?
Anyone can become infected with hepatitis B virus at anytime during their lives, Hepatitis B virus is spread by contact with an infected person’s blood or body fluids. For example, babies can get hepatitis B virus from their infected mothers at birth, and children can get it if they live with or are cared for by an infected person, or even if they share personal care items (e.g., toothbrushes) with an infected person.

Currently, about 1 out of 20 people in the United States have been infected with the hepatitis B virus.

How many people have hepatitis B?
In the United States, tens of thousands of people get infected with the hepatitis B virus each year. About one million people in the US are already infected. Every year, about 130,000 Americans from liver failure or liver cancer caused by hepatitis B. Worldwide, 350 million people are infected.

It is impossible to know if a person is infected with the hepatitis B virus by looking at them. Most people have no symptoms, so we do not know if they are infected. As a result, they can spread the virus to others without knowing it. The only way to know if a person is infected is with a blood test.

In about 95% of cases babies who get infected with the hepatitis B virus during the first few years of life have a 15% to 25% risk of premature death from liver diseases, including liver failure or liver cancer. Hepatitis B virus is one of the leading causes of liver failure or liver cancer among people who are infected with the hepatitis B virus. Experts recommend vaccination against hepatitis B as a routine part of a new born’s hospital care, just like checking the baby’s hearing and heart beat.

How could my baby come in contact with the hepatitis B virus?
In many cases, the hepatitis B virus passes from mother to baby during birth when the mother does not know she is infected. In other cases, the virus is spread to the baby during close contact with an infected family member, caregiver, or friend. Most people who are infected with hepatitis B do not feel sick and have no idea they carry the virus. They are surprised when later they are told they are infected. Many people have no idea how they became infected with the virus. The first line of protection to your baby from infection with the hepatitis B virus, make sure your baby receives the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine before leaving the hospital.

Won’t my baby just recover from hepatitis B?
Babies are not able to fight off hepatitis B virus as adults. About 1 out of 20 babies who get infected in the first year of life will stay infected for life.

How many doses of hepatitis B vaccine will my baby receive?
The basic series is 3 or 4 doses. The first dose should be given in the hospital (at birth), the second dose about 1 month later, and the third dose at age 6 months or later. Because many healthcare providers choose to use certain combination vaccines during well-baby check-ups, some infants will receive 4 doses of hepatitis B vaccine. Either alternative is considered routine and acceptable.

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Is there a cure for hepatitis B?
Yes. Hepatitis B vaccine has been shown to be very safe when given to people of all ages. More than one billion hepatitis B shots have been given worldwide. In the United States, more than 90% of infants, children, and adults have received hepatitis B vaccine. The most common side effects from hepatitis B vaccine are common in the injection site or slight fever. Serious side effects are rare. Some parents worry that their baby’s immune system is immature and cannot handle vaccination at such a young age. Actually, as soon as they are born, babies start effectively dealing with millions of bacteria and viruses. The challenge to their immune systems from vaccines is not comparable to the everyday challenges from living.

How effective is hepatitis B vaccine?
Very effective. More than 95% of infants, children, and adolescents develop immunity to the hepatitis B virus after 3 doses of properly spaced vaccine.

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Won’t my baby just recover from hepatitis B?
Babies are not able to fight off hepatitis B virus as adults. About 1 out of 10 babies who get infected in the first year of life will stay infected for life.

How many doses of hepatitis B vaccine will my baby receive?
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Hepatitis B: What Hospitals Need to Do to Protect Newborns

Hospital staff who need to explain to parents why a dose of hepatitis B vaccine is given at birth may find the educational handout on the next two pages helpful. Easy-to-read Q&As explain how the virus is spread, how serious hepatitis B infection is, and why the first dose of vaccine at is given at birth.

Hepatitis B: What Hospitals Need to Do to Protect Newborns

Addressing the Problem Practical Tools

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