Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Infection in Babies

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Infection in Babies

Patient Information

Maternity (Obstetrics) Department

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Infection in newborn babies

Infection in newborn babies is a rare occurrence, but it does happen. It is often caused by Group B streptococcus (GBS).

What is Group B Streptococcus infection?

Group B Streptococcus, also called Group B Strep or GBS, is a type of bacteria which can live in your body without causing any problems and approximately 30% of the adult population carry it in their gut. It is usually harmless to adults but can cause a severe infection in newborn babies. This is rare, occurring in approximately 1 or 2 in every 3,000 births, but can cause serious illness, including infection of the lungs (pneumonia), infection around the brain (meningitis) and infection in the blood (septicaemia).

These infections can occasionally result in long term disabilities or potentially death for affected babies.

Why do babies develop an infection?

The following factors are widely recognised as increasing the risk of infection in the first few days after a baby's birth:

- Baby's mum having an infection
- Waters breaking more than 24 hours before labour started
- Mum is already known to have Group B Streptococcus (GBS) grown from swabs or urine samples.

GBS infections are less common after the first few days but can occur until a baby is about 3 months old. Doctors at present are unsure exactly how babies develop GBS infections after the first week, but they have recognised which factors may increase their risk of infection. These are:

- Being born before 37 weeks of pregnancy
- Birth weight of less than 2.5 Kg
- If mum has been diagnosed as carrying GBS during this pregnancy.

How can you help prevent infection for your baby?

If, during your antenatal care we think there may be an increased risk of your baby contracting an early infection we will note it and explain it to you, and you will be offered treatment in labour to reduce the risks to baby.

Usually the treatment will include intravenous (given through a drip) antibiotics in labour, though this isn't always the case. Following giving birth, it is likely that your baby will be closely observed for at least 12 hours. We may also take blood samples from your baby to see whether there is any infection.

Unfortunately, infections occurring after the first week of life are not prevented by giving mothers antibiotics in labour.

Good standards of hygiene with frequent and effective hand washing and drying, especially before handling your baby or preparing baby's feeds, is very important for preventing all infections. Use of alcohol gels can be helpful but should not be used as an alternative to hand washing if it is possible to do so. It's important to remember that artificial/acrylic nails, nail varnish and jewellery can increase transfer of bacteria.

Remember to ask anyone who wishes to handle your baby to wash their hands as well.

If you want advice on the most effective way to wash your hands, please ask your Midwife or Health Visitor.

What are the symptoms of infection?

The symptoms of infection include:

- A high temperature
- Difficulty feeding your baby or baby might not want to feed at all
- Difficulty settling your baby or baby might be very irritable.
- Rapid breathing
- A limp floppy baby that may be difficult to wake.

Your baby may not display all of the symptoms, but it is important to remember if your baby appears unwell and is not improving call your GP, Midwife or the emergency services without delay.

What will happen to my baby if they become infected?

Most babies who are seen and treated quickly will recover with no long term problems. The treatment will often involve antibiotics given through a vein and may require a few days in hospital.

Some babies with GBS may develop meningitis. Up to one third (33%) of babies with meningitis may be left with damage to their hearing or sight, develop learning disabilities or have seizures (fits) in their long term future. It is possible, although rare, for babies to die from the infection. This is less common if the infection is treated promptly which is why it is important to ask for medical help if your baby appears unwell.

Further Sources of Information and help

Group B Strep Support is a UK charity that runs a support group for families affected by

Group B Strep infection, you can contact them:

Group B Strep Support

P O Box 203

Haywards Heath

West Sussex

RH16 1GF

Website: www.gbss.org.uk

Telephone: **01444 416176**

Email: info@gbss.org.uk



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