

Information for women who are Hepatitis C virus (HCV) positive

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus, which can affect the liver causing infection and inflammation.

How is it diagnosed?

The diagnosis is made by a blood test. The blood test, which looks for antibodies, has been available for only a few years – in clinical practice since 1991. It can take some weeks for antibodies to appear after exposure to the virus. A further test, which is more specific and looks for the virus, can be carried out if antibodies are present.

How is it passed on (transmitted)?

The infection is spread by blood or blood products from an infected person, by sharing injecting equipment with an infected person, occasionally by unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person, and also occasionally from an infected mother to her baby. It can also be spread by infected needles during tattooing or acupuncture or by accidental needle stick injury.

What are the symptoms?

With an acute infection some people may have vomiting, fever and jaundice or just a flu-like illness. With a chronic infection people may have no symptoms or they may complain of severe tiredness. Up to 90% of people infected with HCV do not show symptoms or become jaundiced.

Will it affect my pregnancy?

Pregnancy is not normally affected by hepatitis C. Having hepatitis C does not affect labour, delivery or postnatal care. Looking across the world, the risk of transmission from mother to baby is thought to be 6-8%. This means that more than 90 out of 100 women who are carrying the virus will not pass it to their baby.

What about breast feeding?

We are not sure yet if the virus can be passed on through breast milk, although most other viruses can be. If you are thinking of breast feeding, you should discuss this with the specialists at the hospital.

What will happen to me after the pregnancy?

You will be referred to the specialists at the Royal Liverpool University Hospital unless already under the care of a specialist elsewhere. The specialists will monitor the effects of HCV on your liver. Adults are discouraged from the use of alcohol and the use of unprescribed drugs. A large percentage of people infected with HCV will develop chronic hepatitis and become carriers of HCV.

The majority of these will only have mild liver disease but others, about 10-20 out of a hundred, will develop severe liver disease, including cirrhosis and very occasionally liver cancer. It may take up to 20-30 years for this to occur. There are treatments available, and these are likely to improve in the future as this is an area of very active research.

What will happen to my baby?

We will contact your GP and Health Visitor by letter to let them know that he or she will need to have two blood tests taken. These tests are needed to check whether the Hepatitis C virus has been transmitted to your baby. Both blood tests will be done at Alder Hey Children's Hospital.

The first will be done at 6 months of ages, the second at 12 months of age.

If the tests are positive, your baby will be referred to be seen by a specialist at Alder Hey.

What about my other children?

Children born before a mother knows she is HCV positive can also be tested. It is in the interest of any child, including those children who may be fostered or adopted, so that if a child is positive appropriate treatment and monitoring can be commenced.

This information is based on current experience and is subject to review.

For further information:

Specialist Midwife
Liverpool Womens Hospital NHS Trust
0151 708 9988 ext. 4367

British Liver Trust
Telephone: 0142 5463080

You may find the following web sites useful for further information

<http://www.womens-health.co.uk/hcv.htm>

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk
www.hepcuk.info

Ref Mat 02/04

Review date August 2006