

Hepatitis C and Breastfeeding

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C (HCV or hep C) is a virus that causes liver inflammation and liver disease. Hepatitis C enters the body when the blood of one person who has the virus comes into contact with the bloodstream of another person. There is no vaccine yet available to protect against the virus.

How is hepatitis C spread?

- Hepatitis C is nearly always spread through blood-to-blood contact with someone who is already infected with the virus.
- There is a small risk (about 5% or 1 in 20) of mothers transmitting hepatitis C to their babies at birth. We do not know why the spread occurs and there is nothing that can be done to reduce this small risk.
- Breastfeeding has not been shown to transmit hepatitis C. Mothers who have hepatitis C can breastfeed their babies if they wish to.

Reasons to interrupt or stop breastfeeding

As the virus can be spread through blood contact, breastfeeding should temporarily be stopped if:

- Your nipples are grazed, cracked or bleeding
- There is any infection in your breast e.g. mastitis
- Your breast is bruised e.g. through injury
- Any cuts are present in your baby's mouth

During this time breast milk should be expressed and thrown away so your milk supply does not decrease. Breastfeeding can recommence after the above symptoms have resolved.

How do I know if my child has hepatitis C?

- A blood test is needed to diagnose HCV. Until a baby is 18 months old, antibody tests may give incorrect results.
- Blood testing can be arranged through your GP or the Infectious Diseases Clinic at Princess Margaret Hospital.

What does it mean if my child gets hepatitis C?

There is not a lot known about how hepatitis C affects children. If any liver disease or damage is caused by hepatitis C it occurs slowly. Usually no medical treatment is required in the early years of life. If your child has hepatitis C they should see a paediatric liver disease specialist (gastroenterologist) regularly.

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