

Can Hepatitis B Surface Antigen-Positive Women Breastfeed?

Women infected with the hepatitis B virus often raise the question about the risk of infection to their infants from breastfeeding. The Perinatal Hepatitis B Prevention Program uses the following sources as reference:

1) Adapted from, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention May 22, 2007,
www.cdc.gov/BREASTFEEDING/disease/hepatitis.htm

Q: Is it safe for a mother infected with hepatitis B virus (HBV) to breastfeed her infant immediately after birth?

A: Yes. Even before the availability of hepatitis B vaccine, HBV transmission through breastfeeding was not reported. All infants born to HBV-infected mothers should receive hepatitis B immune globulin and the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. The second dose of vaccine should be given at aged 1–2 months, and the third dose at aged 6 months. The infant should be tested after completion of the vaccine series, at aged 9–18 months (generally at the next well-child visit), to determine if the vaccine worked and the infant is not infected with HBV through exposure to the mother’s blood during the birth process. However, there is no need to delay breastfeeding until the infant is fully immunized. All mothers who breastfeed should take good care of their nipples to avoid cracking and bleeding.

2) The Red Book, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases “Transmission of Infectious Agents via Human Milk” p.125

“Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) has been detected in milk from HBsAg-positive women. However, studies from Taiwan and England have indicated that breastfeeding by HBsAg-positive women does not increase significantly the risk of infection among their infants. In the United States, infants born to known HBsAg-positive women should receive Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG) and the recommended series of 3 doses of hepatitis B virus vaccine, effectively eliminating any theoretic risk of transmission through breastfeeding. There is no need to delay initiation of breastfeeding until after the infant is immunized. Immunoprophylaxis of infants with hepatitis B virus vaccine alone also provides protection, but optimal therapy of infants born to HBsAg-positive mothers includes HBIG and the 3-dose series of hepatitis B virus vaccine.”

3) Vaccinate Women, winter 2002: A periodical for obstetrician/gynecologists from the Immunization Action Coalition, Volume 1, Number 1, p.1.

In the column “Ask the Experts” Harold Margolis, MD, and Linda Moyer, RN gave the following information.

Q: “Is it safe for an HBsAg-positive mother to breast-feed her infant?”

A: “Yes! An HBsAg-positive mother who wishes to breastfeed should be encouraged to do so, including immediately following delivery. However, the infant should receive HBIG and hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. Although HBsAg can be detected in breast milk, studies done before hepatitis B vaccine was available showed that breastfed infants born to HBsAg-positive mothers did not demonstrate an increased rate of perinatal or early childhood HBV infection. More recent studies have shown that among infants receiving postexposure prophylaxis to prevent perinatal HBV infection, there is no increased risk of infection among breastfed infants.”