



Hepatitis A Positive and Pregnant

Are you pregnant and have the hepatitis A infection? Are you worried that the hepatitis A virus will affect your pregnancy and your unborn baby? Read on to find out all you need to know about having this acute liver disease during your pregnancy.

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Pregnancy is one of the most important experiences most women go through in their lives. During this journey, the health of both mother and baby becomes a top priority to ensure a safe and healthy pregnancy and delivery. But what happens if the mum-to-be contracts an illness during her pregnancy? Acquiring

a disease is obviously not welcome in any person's life, but for a pregnant woman, it can be a particularly significant worry.

Knowing Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is an acute inflammation of the liver caused by the hepatitis A virus. This virus mainly spreads when

a person who has not been vaccinated or previously infected consumes food or water that is contaminated with the faeces of an infected person. Hepatitis A is usually prevalent in areas with unsafe water and inadequate sanitation. Since Singapore maintains high standards of environmental hygiene and cleanliness, the likelihood of being infected with the



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hepatitis A virus here is low. According to the Health Promotion Board, most reported cases of hepatitis A had “past histories of consuming contaminated food from raw or partially cooked cockles”.

Fortunately, unlike hepatitis B and hepatitis C, hepatitis A is not a long-term disease. People who are infected with hepatitis A, including pregnant women, are usually able to recover without treatment.

There are generally no differences in the symptoms of hepatitis A between pregnant women and other types of population groups. These symptoms range from mild to severe; they include fever, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, nausea, fatigue, abdominal discomfort, dark-coloured urine, pale-coloured stools, itchy skin and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). Adults tend to

What about My Baby?

The number one question that pregnant women with hepatitis A (or any other disease for that matter) have is whether their unborn child will be infected. According to Dr Tan Eng Loy, consultant for the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Singapore General Hospital, the severity of hepatitis A tends to increase in older age groups for all types of patients while for pregnant women, those who experience severe illness during their third trimester may be at a higher risk for premature labour.

Dr Tan Eng Loy highlighted a 2006 Israeli study that identified 13 women out of 80,000 pregnancies who contracted acute hepatitis infection during their second and third trimester. “Of these 13 women, more than

(premature labour pain), preterm rupture of membranes (water bag breaking or leaking prematurely), bleeding from the vagina and placenta separation,” he says. “Despite these occurrences, all children had favourable outcomes.”

It is extremely rare for the hepatitis A virus to be transmitted to the unborn child as the mother will produce antibodies to the virus. These antibodies will then be transferred to the foetus through the placenta, thus protecting the baby from the

In fact, anyone – pregnant or no – who has been infected with hepatitis A will develop these antibodies. They protect against future infection, thus most individuals who have had hepatitis A will not develop the infection again.

Dr Tony Tan, specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology & consultant at Raffles Fertility Centre and Raffles Women's Centre also states that the effects of hepatitis A on the unborn child depends on the severity of the mother's infection. "If severe, it may risk prematurity and intrauterine growth restriction to the baby. But that is uncommon as most cases of hepatitis A recover fully and completely," he says.

Can I be Treated while Pregnant?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A as your body will overcome the virus on its own. Pregnant women, as well as other types of patients, who have been infected with the hepatitis A virus are mainly given supportive treatments. This means that the woman's immune system will eventually clear the infection by itself. "Supportive treatments are aimed towards maintaining comfort and adequate nutritional balance and include plenty of rest and a balanced diet. Avoiding certain medications and substances that can harm the liver (such as alcohol) is important and most women make a complete recovery," says

Dr Tan Eng Loy.

Maintaining good personal hygiene is also imperative in order to prevent the infection from spreading to other people.

As with many infectious diseases, the best way to prevent yourself from being infected with the hepatitis A virus is to receive vaccination. The hepatitis A vaccine is made up of the virus in an inactivated form. It is given in two doses, the second of which will be given six to 12 months later. Protection against hepatitis A comes into effect four weeks after vaccination, and this immunity can last for 10 to 20 years.

For pregnant women who have not been vaccinated, a second treatment option is getting an injection of immunoglobulin – an antibody to the hepatitis A virus – along with the hepatitis A vaccination. The immunoglobulin may give temporary immunity to the virus until the vaccine begins to take effect. While it has not been determined if it is entirely safe for pregnant women to receive the hepatitis A vaccination, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States recommends that pregnant women be vaccinated if "another high risk condition or other indication is present".

Like any medication or vaccination, the potential risks and benefits should be discussed with your obstetrician.

Doctors do not usually test for hepatitis A during a woman's pregnancy unless there are symptoms of liver disease present in the woman. This is unlike hepatitis B, which is routinely tested in all pregnant women as the hepatitis B virus can remain in the body and turn into a chronic disease, which risks the possibility of the virus transferring to the

baby at delivery. However, if you or your doctor suspects that you may have hepatitis A during your pregnancy, a blood test can be done to confirm if you have the infection.

Prevention

Apart from receiving vaccination, there are other methods you can adopt in your day-to-day life to reduce the risk of getting hepatitis A. Firstly, you should maintain good personal hygiene practices such as always washing your hands with soap and water after using the bathroom, and before preparing and eating food.

Next, avoid consuming raw seafood and sewage-contaminated water during your pregnancy. This is particularly crucial if you are travelling or staying in places where hepatitis A is widespread. These areas include Africa, Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, Central and South America, Mexico and parts of

the Caribbean. Be sure to pay attention to what you are eating and drinking when travelling to these areas. For instance, avoid buying food from street vendors, and be careful of sliced fruits that may have been washed in unclean water. If safe or bottled water is unavailable, boil the water for at least one minute to ensure that it is safe to drink. ■