

CAN INFECTIONS CAUSE PRETERM BIRTH?

Yes. Studies show that infections cause many preterm births. Some of these infections may not have symptoms that a pregnant woman would recognize. Infections can cause a response in the mother's body that irritates the uterus (where the baby grows) and makes contractions more likely.

Infections also can hurt a baby in the womb or at the time of delivery. Preterm babies are more likely than full-term babies to have problems from infections, because their immune system is underdeveloped. A preterm baby is born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. A full-term baby is born at about 40 weeks. Preterm babies haven't had time to fully grow and develop, so they have a harder time fighting infections.

WHAT INFECTIONS CAN HURT A BABY EARLY IN PREGNANCY?

Some infections can hurt the baby's brain, eyes and other organs if a woman gets them during the first half of pregnancy. These infections include:

- **Rubella (also called German measles)**, an infection that most children now get a vaccine for.
- **Cytomegalovirus (CMV)**, a common infection in preschool children.
- **Toxoplasmosis**, an infection you can get from eating undercooked meat or touching kitty litter.
- **Chicken pox**, a common disease in young children.
- **Syphilis**, a sexually transmitted disease.

WHAT INFECTIONS CAN CAUSE PRETERM BIRTH LATER IN PREGNANCY?

Some infections can cause preterm birth if a woman gets them during the second half of pregnancy. These infections include:

- **Urinary tract infections (UTIs)**. UTIs are infections of the bladder or kidneys. UTIs are common during pregnancy. Your provider will check your urine for bacteria at your prenatal care visits. Signs of a UTI include pain or burning when you go to the bathroom, blood in the urine and having to go to the bathroom often. If you have any of these signs, call your provider. UTIs must be treated with antibiotics.
- **Bacterial vaginosis (BV) or vaginitis**. BV happens when bacteria in the vagina become overgrown and cause an infection. Signs of BV include a white-yellow discharge from the vagina, itching around the vagina or burning when you go to the bathroom. If you have these signs, you should call your provider. BV should be treated with antibiotics.
- **Infections of the teeth or gums**. Brush and floss your teeth regularly during pregnancy. See a dentist for a checkup at least once during your pregnancy.

WHAT INFECTIONS CAN HURT A BABY AT THE TIME OF BIRTH?

A mother can pass certain infections to her baby at birth. These infections include:

- **Group B strep (GBS).** GBS is a common vaginal bacteria in 1 in every 4 women. It usually does not cause problems in adults, but GBS can cause serious problems in a newborn. These problems include pneumonia (an infection of the lungs), sepsis (an infection in the blood stream) and meningitis (an infection of the fluid and linings around the brain). Only 1 in 100 pregnant women with GBS will pass the infection to her baby, but when that happens it can be life-threatening for the baby. All pregnant women are tested for GBS during the last few weeks of pregnancy because the infection is so harmful to babies. Women with GBS are treated with antibiotics during labor and delivery to protect the baby. Tell your labor-room nurses if you had a positive test for GBS.
- **Herpes (HSV).** HSV usually causes fever blisters on the mouth but can affect the area around the vagina. If a woman has HSV around her vagina during delivery or when her water breaks, the baby can get the infection. This can cause meningitis (an infection of the membranes around the brain), brain damage and death. If you have an HSV breakout at the time of delivery, your provider may deliver the baby by cesarean section (also called c-section) to protect the baby. A c-section is when a baby is born through a cut that the doctor makes in the mother's belly and uterus. If you have a skin breakout around your vagina, tell your provider so you can be tested for HSV.
- **Chorioamnionitis.** This is an infection of the membranes of the placenta. It is caused by the same kinds of bacteria that cause UTIs and GBS. Sometimes these infections can cause preterm labor. If this happens, the provider may need to deliver the baby early to protect it from infection. These infections can be very serious if they pass to the baby.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF FROM INFECTIONS DURING PREGNANCY?

- Wash your hands well and avoid situations where you may come into contact with young children who are sick, or adults who may be sick. Tell your provider right away if you think you have an infection or have come into contact with one.
- Pay attention to your body. Tell your provider if you have a fever or any other sign of an infection. When an infection is treated early, there is less chance of it hurting the baby.

Talk to your provider about getting vaccinated against infections. Getting vaccinated means you get a shot that can keep you from getting certain infections. You can get vaccinated for infections like rubella and the flu.