

# HEPATITIS B IMMUNISATION

## THE BIRTH-DOSE AND YOUR BABY

With your consent, your baby will get their first dose of the hepatitis B virus immunisation soon after birth. Below are some frequently asked questions about this immunisation and why it is important to immunise your newborn baby against the hepatitis B virus.

### ***Why is the hepatitis B virus immunisation important?***

The hepatitis B virus:

- causes life-long hepatitis B infection in 90 per cent of people infected as babies
- can cause long-term liver disease and liver cancer
- is very infectious
- has no cure
- is often carried by people who don't know they are infected.

### ***At what age do babies get the hepatitis B immunisation?***

Within 24 hours of birth (the birth-dose), and then at two, four, and six months as per the Australian National Immunisation Program Schedule.

### ***Why do babies need the hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose?***

The hepatitis B virus birth-dose protects your baby until their next dose at two months. This is important because unimmunised newborns are very vulnerable to getting infections.

### ***I've tested negative for hepatitis B. Does my baby still need the immunisation?***

Yes. While most babies infected with hepatitis B get it from their mothers, it can also be spread:

- through close contact with family members and carers, or other people who don't know they are infected
- by infected blood, even microscopic amounts, through cuts or abrasions
- by contaminated objects such as, needles, medical equipment, nail clippers, toys, razors, and toothbrushes.

### ***Hepatitis B is rare in Australia. Does my baby still need the immunisation?***

Yes. Hepatitis B is the most common blood-borne virus in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Up to 1.1 per cent of Australians have been diagnosed with hepatitis B but almost half of all infected people don't know they have it.<sup>1-3</sup>

### ***Does the hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose have any side-effects?***

The hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose is usually well tolerated. Side-effects, if they do occur, are mild. The most common side-effects are:

- irritability
- slight fever, and
- reduced appetite.<sup>5</sup>

If these effects occur they usually go away quickly. Serious side effects are very rare.

### ***Can the hepatitis B immunisation cause autism?***

No. Immunisations, including the hepatitis B immunisation, do NOT cause autism or developmental delays.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Does the hepatitis B birth-dose contain mercury or aluminium?***

The vaccines used in Australia do not contain the mercury preservative thiomersal.

The vaccines do contain 0.25mg of aluminium, which is not harmful. This is a small amount when compared to what babies usually get through their diet (over a six months period about 7mg of aluminium through breast milk and 38mg through formula).<sup>7</sup>

***Does the hepatitis B vaccine contain human blood products?***

No. The vaccines used in Australia are produced using yeast cells and do not contain any ingredients from humans.<sup>5</sup>

***Can the hepatitis B immunisation cause hepatitis B infection?***

No. It is not a live vaccine and cannot cause hepatitis B infection.

***I think my baby is too young to have their first immunisation. Should I wait till I see my local doctor (GP) in six weeks?***

No. Your baby is vulnerable to infection with hepatitis B if they do not receive the birth-dose.

***Can the hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose “overload” my baby’s immune system?***

No. Babies can respond safely and appropriately to as many as ten different immunisations at once.<sup>8</sup>

***Will my baby get unnecessary antibiotics for fever due to the immunisation?***

No. The hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose will not increase the chance of your baby having a fever and being investigated or treated for infection.<sup>9</sup>

***My baby was born prematurely, should they have the hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose?***

Yes. Premature babies are at higher risk of infection and so immunisation is very important. The immune response to the vaccine in some premature babies may not be as effective as babies born at term. Your doctor will let you know if your baby needs an extra dose or if the birth-dose should be delayed.

***I feel that my baby has been through a difficult birth and has had enough needles already. Should I delay this dose?***

No. The hepatitis B immunisation birth-dose should not be delayed for these reasons.

***Are there any natural or alternative medicines I can use for immunity instead?***

No. Only immunisation can protect your baby from hepatitis B virus infection.

***I am worried about getting biased advice. Where can I find trusted information about the hepatitis B immunisation?***

Your local doctor, pharmacist, and the midwives and doctors looking after you during your pregnancy can answer your questions.

**For more information**

**Medicines Information Service**

Pharmacy Department  
Level 1, The Royal Women’s Hospital  
20 Flemington Road Parkville VIC 3052  
Hours: 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday  
T: (03) 8345 3190  
E: drug.information@thewomens.org.au

**Better Health Channel**

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

**National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance**

www.ncirs.org.au

**REFERENCES**

Information about the references used in the writing of this fact sheet are available on request from the Medicines Information Service.