

Group B Streptococcus

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention
An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

Paul R. LePage, Governor

Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

What is group B Streptococcus?

Group B streptococcus (group B strep) is a type of bacteria that causes illness in newborn babies, pregnant women, the elderly, and adults with other illnesses, such as diabetes or liver disease. Group B strep is the most common cause of life-threatening infections in newborns.

How does group B strep affect newborns?

Most cases of group B strep disease among newborns happen in the first week of life ("early-onset disease"), usually a few hours after birth. Infection of the blood, lungs and fluid and lining around the brain (meningitis) are the most common problems. Group B strep disease may also develop in infants one week to several months after birth ("late-onset disease"). Meningitis is more common with late-onset group B strep disease.

How is group B strep diagnosed and treated in babies?

If a mother received antibiotics for group B strep during labor, the baby will be watched to see if he or she should get extra testing or treatment. If the doctors suspect that a baby has group B strep infection, they will take a sample of the baby's sterile body fluids, such as blood or spinal fluid. Group B strep infections in both newborns and adults are usually treated with antibiotics.

Can group B strep be prevented among newborns?

Yes! Most early-onset group B strep disease in newborns can be prevented by giving pregnant women antibiotics during labor. Any pregnant woman who had a previous baby with group B strep disease, who has a bladder (urinary tract) infection caused by group B strep, or who tests positive for group B strep during pregnancy should receive antibiotics during labor or when their water breaks.

How do you find out if you carry group B strep during pregnancy?

National guidelines recommend that a pregnant woman be tested for group B strep in her vagina

and rectum when she is 35 to 37 weeks pregnant. The test is simple and does not hurt. A sterile swab ("Q-tip") is used to collect a sample from the vagina and the rectum. This is sent to a laboratory for testing.

What happens if my pregnancy screening test is positive for group B strep?

To prevent group B strep bacteria from being passed to the newborn, pregnant women who carry group B strep should be given antibiotics at the time of labor or when their water breaks.

Are there any symptoms if you are a group B strep carrier?

Most pregnant women have no symptoms when they are carriers for group B strep bacteria. Sometimes, group B strep can cause bladder infections during pregnancy or infections in the womb during labor or after delivery.

Being a carrier (testing positive for group B strep, but having no symptoms) is quite common. Around 25% of women may carry the bacteria at any time. This does not mean that they have group B strep disease, but it does mean that they are at higher risk for giving their baby a group B strep infection during birth.

What should I do if my water breaks early?

If your water breaks before term, get to the hospital right away. If your group B strep test has not been done, or if you don't know if you have been tested, you should talk with your doctor about group B strep disease prevention. If you have already tested positive for group B strep, remind the doctors and nurses during labor.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.