

Castleton Obstetrics

→ AND GYNECOLOGY ←

 Community Physicians of Indiana

PARVOVIRUS INFECTION IN PREGNANCY

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WHAT IS PARVOVIRUS?

This is a virus infection that causes a common childhood illness called Fifth Disease. In children, we often see this as a red rash on the face that looks like “slapped cheeks” and a lace looking rash on the arms, legs, chest and stomach. Often, just before the rash comes on, the child may have a slight fever, feel tired, cough or have an upset stomach. Most often the infection is not even noticed or causes only minor symptoms. School and community outbreaks of this disease are common and occur mainly in late winter and spring. The virus is spread by droplets from coughing and contact with saliva. By the time the person with this illness has the rash; they have already spread the virus to others. 30-60% of Americans have had the disease by the time they are adults. After being exposed to the germ, you can become sick anywhere from 4-20 days later. Children and adults with this infection usually are not very sick and recover completely. In pregnancy, it can sometimes cause special problems for the baby.

ARE THERE STEPS I CAN TAKE TO PREVENT BECOMING INFECTED?

When there is an outbreak of this disease at day care centers or school classrooms, pregnant women who have not had this disease should think about staying away until the outbreak is over. Unfortunately, you probably won't know if you once had this infection unless a special test has been done on your blood.

ONCE CHILDREN HAVE THE RASH, THEY CAN NOT SPREAD THE GERMS, SO IT IS OK TO BE AROUND THEM; BUT YOU MAY HAVE ALREADY BEEN EXPOSED TO THE GERMS AND COULD GET SICK IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS.

WHAT PROBLEMS CAN PARVOVIRUS CAUSE?

If you have been exposed or think you may have been, the risk of a problem for the baby is low. In fact, only one out of three mothers that are infected passes it to the baby. If it is passed to the baby, there is then a 5-10% chance that the baby will die. Another rare problem that can occur is called “hydrops fetalis”. If this happens, the baby's red blood cells are attacked by the virus and the baby becomes anemic with developing inside of you. This causes the baby to grow abnormally and have a swollen body. It also causes heart problems and sometimes the death of the baby. It is possible that some other birth defects can happen, but these are very rare.

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Adults with the infection may not get sick at all or can have the same illness as in children.

WHAT TIME IN PREGNANCY IS MOST DANGEROUS?

The most serious time in pregnancy for this infection to pass to the baby is during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. If it occurs later in pregnancy, usually the risk that it will pass to the baby and cause serious problems is less. However, there are rare cases of death after the 30th week.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO SEE IF I HAVE RECENTLY BEEN INFECTED?

If you believe you have been exposed, your doctor can order special blood tests. These tests can tell us if you have recently been infected, have never been infected, or were infected many years ago. The tests are not 100% foolproof and sometimes give you uncertain results. If the tests show you are not infected now or were infected long before you became pregnant, there is little or risk of the baby getting the virus.

IF I HAVE HAD A RECENT INFECTION, ARE THERE TESTS THAT CAN TELL IF THE BABY HAS CAUGHT THE VIRUS?

There are a few tests that can be used to try to find out if the baby is infected. These include ultrasound and tests on the baby's blood. Each of these tests can still be uncertain in letting us know if the baby will be normal. Your doctor will tell you more about what test can be done and how long these will take.

IS THERE TREATMENT THAT CAN PROTECT THE BABY?

There is no treatment of Parvovirus infection in humans. If the baby is found to be infected and has anemia, it may be possible to give blood transfusions and sometimes heart medicine to the baby while it is still in the uterus. This does not always cure the baby's problems. Some babies will heal on their own without any treatment.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE TESTS ARE ABNORMAL AND THE BABY IS PROBABLY INFECTED?

If the results are abnormal, your doctor will discuss what this means for you, the baby and your family.

The choices open to you are: (1) continuing with the pregnancy and choosing the best hospital and medical staff for your delivery, or (2) terminating the pregnancy (abortion). As there is a very low risk of

damage to babies who survive infection in the mother, some experts feel that termination of the pregnancy (abortion) may not be necessary. Your physician and staff will give you more information to help in dealing with any decision you make.

CAN I PASS THIS INFECTION TO OTHER PEOPLE?

If you are infected and have the rash, you no longer pass it to others.

IF I JUST HAD THE INFECTION, CAN I GET IT AGAIN IN LATER PREGNANCIES?

No, usually your body is protected (immune) after the first infection and your later pregnancies should not be affected.