

Bacterial Infection in Newborn Babies

Patient information Leaflet

July 2019



Bacterial infection is a common and important cause of illness in newborn babies which is treated with antibiotics. All newborn babies are born with bacteria, most of which are usually harmless, but some babies can go on to develop an infection.

Newborn babies are more prone to develop an infection if:-

- They are born prematurely
- Their mother has an infection in her blood, urine or birth canal before baby's birth
- Their mother had a previous baby with an infection
- The membranes (protective sac of fluid surrounding the baby during pregnancy) are broken for more than 24 hours before baby is born and baby is born prematurely.

Babies with risk factors for infection may require tests to look for this, including a full blood count (FBC), Alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and C - reactive protein (CRP). The baby will need to be observed and have their pulse rate, breathing rate and temperature checked regularly for a minimum period of 12 to 24 hours.

If the blood tests suggest the baby has an infection or if baby shows signs of infection for example fast breathing rate, the baby will need further blood tests, including blood culture, and will be started on intravenous antibiotics. Some babies may need to be started on intravenous Aciclovir if a viral infection is suspected and additional blood tests taken. In some babies, fluid from the spine, called cerebral spinal fluid (CSF) and urine is taken to look for infection and a chest x-ray may be done. It takes 2 days to obtain the results of blood, urine and CSF cultures. Not all babies need all these tests, and the medical staff will decide which tests your baby needs.

If your baby develops symptoms of infection, they may need to be admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Early symptoms of infection include noisy or difficulty breathing, poor feeding and unstable temperature.

How is an infection treated?

Bacterial infection is treated with antibiotics for between 2 and 10 days. Some babies may require treatment for a longer period of time. The antibiotics used are very safe and serious side effects are rare. All newborn babies who receive antibiotics need to have blood taken to monitor one of their antibiotic levels (gentamicin). In the unlikely event that the gentamicin level is high, the antibiotic dose or frequency will be reduced and baby will be offered an additional hearing test at 8 months of age. If there is a family history of sensorineural hearing loss, please let the doctors know as different antibiotics may need to be used.

Viral infection is treated with an anti-viral drug called Aciclovir. The length of treatment will depend on the blood results and whether active infection is found.

Your midwife will tell you what times your baby will be due antibiotics. If you think your baby is due a dose of antibiotics but no-one comes to give it, please ask your midwife as it is important that antibiotics are given on time.

