



January 2011

Group B Streptococcal Infection in Newborn Infants

Group B Streptococcus infection in newborns

Group B Streptococcus (GBS) is a type of bacteria that can cause serious infections in newborns. GBS is the most common cause of blood infection and meningitis (infection of the fluid and lining surrounding the brain) in newborns and is also a frequent cause of newborn pneumonia.

Many people carry GBS without knowing it. A person who carries GBS but does not show signs of infections is said to be “colonized” with GBS.

It is estimated that 10 to 30 percent of women are colonized with GBS in their vagina or lower intestine. GBS does not typically cause problems for most women who carry the bacteria, but can cause infections in their newborn babies.

The risk of serious disease is greatest among premature infants who are more vulnerable to GBS infections than older infants because of their less-developed bodies and immune systems. Premature babies infected with GBS are at higher risk for long-term complications and/or death. Since most babies are born full term, however, full term babies account for 75 per cent of the cases of GBS disease in newborns.

How infants become infected with GBS

Typically, babies are exposed to GBS at some point during labour and delivery. They may be exposed to GBS after the mother’s amniotic membranes rupture (water breaks), or while passing through the birth canal. The babies become infected when they swallow or inhale the bacteria.

Babies can become infected with GBS prior to labour and delivery if the bacterium travels upward from the mother’s vagina into the uterus.

Newborns can also become infected with GBS after they’re born by being in contact with their GBS positive mother or another person who is a carrier of the disease.

Information sheet

For further information, please call:
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca