Newborn Infection

Newborn babies can get infections easily because their immune systems are not completely developed. Most newborn infections are caused by bacteria. Bacteria that normally live in the mother’s birth canal or on the skin can be swallowed or breathed in by the baby and get into the baby’s lungs or blood. Newborn babies with an infection can get sick very fast, so if your baby is at risk for infection, he may need to be tested and treated with antibiotics just to be safe.

**Group B Streptococcal Disease (GBS)** GBS is a bacteria that can cause infection in the newborn including sepsis (infection in the blood), pneumonia (infection in the lungs), and meningitis (infection in the brain). GBS is a normal bacteria that lives in the vaginal canal of 1/3 of women and is usually harmless, but sometimes can cause infection in the baby. Mothers are tested for GBS between 35 and 37 weeks of pregnancy and if positive, usually receive antibiotics during delivery to help prevent infection in the baby. GBS is just one type of bacteria that can cause newborn infection.

**Signs of Infection in a Newborn**

- Any change in behavior or appearance that you think is not normal.
- Poor feeding: feeding behavior is the one universal and reliable measure of a newborn’s well-being. Once breastfeeding is established, newborns should be vigorous and eat well. If your baby has a sudden change in his feeding pattern or stops eating well, it could be a sign of infection.
- Breathing fast or working hard to breathe.
- Decrease in muscle tone (weak or floppy).
- Extra sleepy, especially if this is a change from previous behavior.
- Change in color: pale, bluish or gray arms and legs; or bluish color around the lips and mouth.
- Fever above 100.4 F or low temperature below 96.8 F.
- Unusual crying, moaning, grunting.
Tests for Infection If your baby has risks or signs of infection, he will be closely checked by a Pediatric doctor. If the doctor feels your baby might have an infection, the following tests may be ordered:

- Complete Blood Count (CBC): counts the different types of cells in the blood, infection can cause abnormal counts (results available within a few hours)
- Blood Culture: a test to see if bacteria is growing in the blood (final results after 48 hours)
- Urine Culture: a test to see if bacteria is growing in the urine (final results after 48 hours)
- Chest X-ray: if the baby is having trouble breathing a chest x-ray may be taken to look for pneumonia
- Spinal Tap (lumbar puncture): a test to check for infection of fluid surrounding the brain. Any baby who is very sick from infection or has bacteria in his blood could get meningitis and a lumbar puncture may be ordered to check for infection in the brain.

Treatment for Infection If your baby has signs of infection or if the tests come back abnormal, your baby will be treated with IV antibiotics. The two antibiotics typically used are Ampicillin and Gentamicin. Both of these antibiotics have been used with babies for a long time and are safe for your baby. If a baby has an infection, bacteria will usually grow from the blood culture within 48 hours. If the test is negative and your baby’s symptoms go away quickly, the antibiotics will usually be stopped after 48 hours. If the tests are positive for a bacterial infection or your baby’s symptoms strongly suggest infection, your baby may get antibiotics for 7 to 14 days.

At Home Babies are carefully monitored in the hospital and need to be healthy with no signs of infection prior to going home. But no matter how careful we are, it is possible that your baby could develop an infection after going home. Even babies of GBS positive mothers treated with antibiotics can develop an infection later on. Refer to the above “Signs of Infection” and call your baby’s doctor right away if you have any concerns.