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Sepsis - understanding serious infection in pregnancy and after birth

Maternity Services
Lincoln County Hospital (01522) 573889
Pilgrim Hospital (01205) 445424

www.ulh.nhs.uk

Introduction

You have been given this leaflet to give you some information and guidance on what to do if you think you have an infection during or after your pregnancy. Infection in pregnancy and/or after your baby's birth should never be taken lightly. In rare circumstances, even when you are usually healthy, you can become critically ill very quickly from serious infection or sepsis. Infection can progress to a more serious situation where infection spreads to the blood stream and occurs throughout the body. This is known as "sepsis".

Definition of sepsis

Sepsis is a severe infection which affects the entire body, the first signs are usually a rise in your temperature, heart rate and breathing. You may also feel unwell, have chills and flu-type symptoms, abdominal pain in your tummy and diarrhoea. This can progress very quickly in rare circumstances to a potentially life threatening condition.

Timing of serious infections: when am I more likely to get an infection or sepsis?

Sepsis in pregnancy most commonly occurs between December and April, often preceded by a sore throat or other upper respiratory tract infections. Sepsis may happen in pregnancy or after your baby is born. The risk of getting an infection is increased in the following circumstances:

- After having a miscarriage
- If your waters ruptured early or more than 36 hours before your baby was born
- If you developed a urine infection (urinary tract infection)
- If your baby was born prematurely
- After you have had your baby - this is the most common time for serious infection (septic illness) to develop; in particular if you had your baby by caesarean section, by forceps or vacuum, or if you had a third degree tear (large tear to your perineum)

How can sepsis before or after childbirth be prevented?

- Good personal hygiene; daily showers/baths
- Frequent maternity pad changes/keeping your stitches clean and dry
- Proper hand washing and drying especially **before and after** changing your maternity pads
- Keeping your caesarean section wound clean and dry

These measures may prevent infection that could lead to sepsis.

When should I contact the doctor?

You should contact your GP or the maternity unit immediately if you are feeling concerned, unwell or if you notice any of the following during pregnancy or after your baby is born:

- Sore throat, suspected chest infection
- Headache, flu-like symptoms, chills
- Burning on passing urine
- Rash
- Vaginal discharge which is foul smelling and/or an unusual change in colour
- Abdominal pain that doesn't seem to be getting better
- Diarrhoea
- Sudden increase in vaginal bleeding postnatally
- After a caesarean birth if your scar becomes red or painful

It is important that you complete any course of antibiotics that you are prescribed during pregnancy and the postnatal period. This may prevent more serious infection developing.

Where can I get more information on sepsis?

If you require more information on sepsis you can ask hospital staff who will be able to answer your questions.

You could also visit The UK Sepsis Trust at www.Sepsistrust.org. The Sepsis Trust is the UK's leading Sepsis charity and have a support team with trained advisors who can be contacted on 0800 389 6255 or at info@Sepsistrust.org

References

If you require a full list of references for this leaflet please email patient.information@ulh.nhs.uk
The Trust endeavours to ensure that the information given here is accurate and impartial.

If you require this information in another language, large print, audio (CD or tape) or braille, please e-mail the Patient Information team at patient.information@ulh.nhs.uk