

## Infection and Your Baby

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### What is an infection?

An infection is an illness caused by germs such as bacteria, viruses or fungus. The body's immune system fights back when germs attack the body. White blood cells go to fight and destroy the germs. Another word for Infection is sepsis.

### Why do babies get infections?

Babies can get infections very easily. Premature babies have a very high risk of getting infections. They do not have fully developed immune systems to fight germs. Your baby may get sick because your baby cannot fight the germs causing the infection.

Babies can get infections in these parts of the body:

- blood
- lungs
- urine
- spinal fluid around the brain
- bowels
- eyes
- skin
- bone

Infections can be caused by germs:

- inside the uterus, called a congenital infection.
- entering the uterus through a break in the amniotic membrane (when the "water breaks" early)
- in the birth passage as the baby moves through
- in the nursery area
- on people's hands
- in the nursery, called a nosocomial or hospital acquired infection

### What are the signs of infection?

We check each baby closely for these signs of infection:

- low body temperature or fever
- fast heart rate
- pale, white, grey or blue coloured skin
- low blood pressure

## **What are the signs of infection (continued)?**

More signs of infection that we check babies closely for:

- low or high blood sugar
- problems breathing or needing oxygen or a ventilator machine
- apnea – when the baby stops breathing
- the baby is not feeding well
- milk left in the stomach after many feedings called residuals
- the baby is less active or more sleepy
- the baby is irritable or cries a lot

## **How do you know if my baby has an infection?**

Babies have a series of tests to check for infection. These tests include:

- Checking for germs in one or more of these areas:
  - blood
  - spinal fluid
  - skin
  - lung secretions
  - stool or bowel movements
  - urine
  - drainage from eyes
- Counting the white blood cells (WBC) in a small sample of blood
- Checking for infection with an x-ray of the chest and abdomen

It can take about 5 days to get the results from all of the tests. There are times when we are not able to find out how a baby got an infection. Sometimes a baby shows signs of infection but the tests do not show where or what kind of infection is present.

Sometimes, the way a baby reacts to other problems can look like the signs of an infection.

## What can be done to treat an infection?

If your baby has an infection or an infection is very likely, your baby will be given antibiotic medication. These medications are given to your baby through an intravenous tube. Your baby may need 2 to 10 days or more of medication. The length of time depends on the kind of infection your baby has.

Antibiotic medication cannot help an infection caused by a virus.

A few viruses and fungus infections can be treated with special medications.

## What can be done to prevent infections?

Infection can be a serious problem for babies. To prevent infections we try to keep your baby's environment as germ free as we can.

You can help by washing your hands well before and after you visit your baby. This helps prevent germs from coming into and leaving the unit. When you first enter the area to visit your baby, wash your hands for a full 2 minutes washing all the way up to your elbows. Then during your visit if you touch something before touching your baby, wash your hands again.



A waterless hand washing product is also available in many places on the unit. The waterless product kills germs but will not remove soil. You need to use soap and water to remove dirt.

Some examples when you or other visitors should wash your hands are:

- before and after entering the unit
- before and after holding your baby
- after touching your face
- after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose
- after changing a diaper
- after going to the washroom

If you get a cold, cold sore, flu or any other illness, please check with your baby's nurse before you visit the unit. To come to the NICU, all parents, siblings and visitors **MUST** be healthy and feeling well.

## **For questions or concerns**

When you have questions or concerns about infections and your baby's health, please talk to a member of your health care team.