# Pregnancy and Hepatitis C

For women with hepatitis C interested in becoming mothers, treatment before or after pregnancy is possible.

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The good news is that 96% of pregnant women with hepatitis C don't transmit the virus to their fetuses. And among those who do, many do so unknowingly because HCV infection often causes no signs or symptoms.

A liver disease caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), hep C is primarily transmitted through direct contact with contaminated blood. Hep C can either resolve after a short period or become a chronic infection that may cause liver damage and liver cancer.

But fortunately, there are treatments for HCV. These antiviral medications can cure more than 95% of people with the virus, which is why it's key that women get tested and treated prior to becoming pregnant or after they give birth.

To learn more about this health issue, Real Health spoke with Stephanie Seitz, ND, MPH, a licensed naturopathic doctor in private practice in Scottsdale, Arizona. Seitz specializes in women's health and combines natural care with conventional medicine to meet the needs of her individual patients.

What advice do you have for women with hep C who want to become pregnant?

If women have hepatitis C, they should consult with an ob-gyn for guidance before they become pregnant. If they are on antiviral medication, they may have to stop their treatment regimen. They will also want to make sure their viral load is acceptable, as the risk of passing the illness on to their child is significantly higher if the mother has a high viral load. Women with hep C also need to talk with their doctors about getting the proper nutritional support while trying to get pregnant, which includes taking prenatal vitamins.

What advice do you have for pregnant women with hep C who are considering natural and alternative therapies for the illness?

Importantly, it's key that women remember that supplements can't replace a healthy diet or lifestyle. In addition, these substances are no substitute for treatment plans recommended by their health care team. Trusted resources that offer advice to the public about nontraditional

therapies, such as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, suggest that individuals with hep C talk with their health care providers about any complementary approaches to treatment they consider using to make the best and most well-informed decisions.

What are the biggest health concerns for moms-to-be with hep C and their babies?

The biggest issue is that during pregnancy, there is a chance that mothers with hep C can pass the infection to their children. Maternal antibody is present for the first 18 months of life and before the infant mounts an immunologic response. Currently, national guidelines recommend that doctors test the baby around that time for hepatitis C. If a newborn develops hep C, the child requires ongoing medical care, as they are at possible risk of complications from the illness. Right now, pregnant women must wait until after they give birth to undergo treatment for the illness. This is because antiviral medications for hepatitis C therapy are not approved by the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] for use during pregnancy. In addition, these mothers-to-be must also stick to a healthy diet to keep themselves and their little ones healthy.

What is the best way for a woman to protect her unborn child from hep C?

Perhaps the best way for a woman to protect her unborn child from hepatitis C is to know her hep C status before she conceives. This way, if a woman tests positive for hepatitis C, she can get treatment long before she becomes pregnant. However, if a woman with hep C becomes pregnant, she should immediately speak with her doctor, so she is aware of the possible risks to her baby.

How does hep C affect breastfeeding?

New moms with hepatitis C can still breastfeed. The hepatitis C virus will not pass through the breast milk. However, the Centers for Disease Control recommends that mothers with HCV infection should consider abstaining from breastfeeding if their nipples are cracked or bleeding. In addition, most experts agree that mothers should begin hep C treatment after they finish breastfeeding their babies.

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