

# Herpes, Neonatal Fact Sheet

## What is Neonatal Herpes?

Neonatal Herpes simplex is a viral infection caused by transmission of herpes simplex virus from mother to newborn. Newborn babies come in contact with the herpes virus at delivery when passing through the infected birth canal. They can also become infected during pregnancy, or following rupture of the membranes. Infection passed through the placenta has also been reported. Sites other than the genital area in the mother and other non-maternal sources have been seen.

## When is the baby most at risk for acquiring Neonatal Herpes?

Risk to the infant depends on 2 important maternal factors:

- the stage of pregnancy at which the mother excretes the virus
- whether it is the first time the mother has had the infection.

The greatest risk to the newborn baby at delivery occurs when the mother has had her first ever herpes sore during the last 3 weeks of pregnancy. 30-50% of babies delivered through the infected birth canal are affected. A new infection in the mother raises the risk of infection from about 1% to over 30% as maternal immunity provides some protection.

## What is the incubation period?

The incubation period is usually 6 to 11 days from birth to the onset of disease.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

Infections can be divided into 3 clinical presentations:

- widespread infections involving the liver, exhibiting jaundice, rashes, breathing difficulties and shock
- central nervous system involvement including encephalitis
- infections limited to the skin, eyes or mouth.

The first two forms are often lethal.

## How can it be avoided?

When infections occur in late pregnancy, a C-section is advised before the membranes rupture.

## Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca)

## References

- Behrman, R.E., Kleigman, H.A., Jenson, H.B., (2000). Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics. (16th Ed.)
- Heymann, D.L., (2008). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. (19th Ed.). Washington,DC: American Public Health Association.

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